

## Closing The Gap

# We Need The North-South Rail Link, Not South Station Expansion

## Link Offers Long-Term Solution To Capacity Issues At Both Stations

By Michael Dukakis and Brad Bellows | Special To Banker & Tradesman | Sep 25, 2016

---

A few weeks ago the Baker administration certified the completion of the state environmental review for the South Station expansion project.

When first conceived, it was expected that this project might cost a few hundred million dollars and provide at least a short-term solution to the growing train congestion at South Station. By 2013 cost estimates had risen to \$850 million. In 2015, they passed \$1.6 billion, and the documents certified last month contain no cost estimate whatsoever – a very strange omission after more than \$30 million of study.

Worse still, many of the promised benefits have evaporated over the course of the five-year study. For starters, air-rights development above the adjacent post office site has been consistently cited by expansion supporters as a key project benefit, most recently in a [Banker & Tradesman op-ed column](#) on Sept. 12. Yet, the MBTA general manager reported almost two years ago that “the cost of including joint development infrastructure (foundations, underground parking, access ramps, etc.) would leave little, if any, revenue from development to assist with the costs associated with the SSX project.”

It has become clear that dedicating the lower floors of a waterfront site to parking trains is a hindrance, not a boon, to development. Little wonder, then, that the latest plans include no air-rights development whatsoever.

Layover requirements for idle trains are yet another challenge that has grown with the passage of time. Like all stub end terminals, South Station requires large storage yards nearby. For many years it was assumed that Widett Circle might be a good place to park these trains, but Boston Mayor Marty Walsh now estimates that real estate development there would yield more than \$100 million a year in new tax revenue for the city, but not if it has to spend a billion dollars to deck over the train storage yards before it can build anything there.

By contrast a tunnel that allows trains to run below the city will unlock far greater capacity while solving a host of other problems that currently bedevil our fragmented rail and transit systems. As the Wall Street Journal recently reported, a revolution in automated tunnel-boring technology “has

dramatically reduced the cost and disruption of building tunnels under busy cities for rail and other projects.” Cities across the globe are now using this technology to connect their fragmented transportation systems, improve service and recover surface real estate that would otherwise be wasted. Here’s why Boston should follow their example.

First, unlike surface expansion, the rail link will be a long-term solution for capacity issues at both North and South stations. In fact, run-through service is so much more efficient that it will actually reduce the need for surface tracks at both terminals.

Second, it will reduce the waste and gross inefficiencies of running separate systems, saving as much as \$100 million a year and attracting thousands of new riders who today simply won’t use commuter rail if it requires them to get off the train and connect with the T for one or two additional rides to reach their destination. Those saved dollars and additional passenger revenues will go a long way toward paying for the project.

Third, trains can be stored in many locations along a fully integrated system and will no longer require valuable downtown land that Boston can then use for new taxpaying development.

Fourth, it will greatly expand access to the Seaport, something that part of the city desperately needs if it is going to realize its full potential, and will do the same for North Station, the hospital district and Gateway Cities across the region.

Fifth, it will relieve growing congestion on our overloaded transit lines and regional highways as rail connections become more convenient and attractive.

Finally, why spend \$1.6 billion for seven new tracks at South Station when the North-South Rail Link makes that investment totally unnecessary?

For these many reasons, Gov. Charlie Baker and the Legislature have wisely authorized a new study of the North-South Rail Link to begin shortly. That effort should be given the highest priority.

Nine years ago this newspaper strongly endorsed rail unification because “the North-South Rail Link will close a gaping hole in the center of the Bay State’s public and private transportation systems.”

That was the right call then, and the case for “closing the gaping hole” is even more compelling today.

*Michael Dukakis is the former governor of Massachusetts and current professor of political science at Northeastern University. Brad Bellows is an architect, a member of the NSRL Working group, was a member of the NSRL Citizens Advisory Committee from 1995-2003, and was a consultant to the Central Artery Rail Link Task Force in 1993.*

<http://www.bankerandtradesman.com/2016/09/need-north-south-rail-link-not-south-station-expansion/>