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.

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