



Rail expansion becomes runaway train

By Charles D. Chioppo

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No one ever said that policy making had to be pretty, but sometimes you really have to shake your head at how the commonwealth's priorities are shaped.

Seeking support for his failed 1996 Senate bid, then-Governor Bill Weld went to southeastern Massachusetts and, seemingly off the top of his head, promised to bring commuter rail service to New Bedford and Fall River. Six years later a new transportation bond bill is offering the promise of commonwealth funding in the midst of a fiscal crisis, and Secretary Robert Durand recently gave the project an important environmental approval.

It might almost be amusing, like Weld and Durand's famous post-press conference dives into the Charles River, except the project is neither affordable nor defensible on its merits.

As part of a 1991 agreement to mitigate the environmental impact of the Big Dig, the commonwealth committed the MBTA to build a series of new projects. They include the controversial Greenbush commuter rail line to the South Shore, the Washington Street and South Boston legs of the Silver Line and a tunnel connecting the two, extending the Green Line to Somerville, and extending the Blue Line to meet the Red Line at Charles Station.

Construction costs for the remaining mitigation requirements would top \$2.5 billion over the next decade. Since fares and other system revenues cover less than half the cost of operating a new line, each project would also increase the T's operating deficit.

According to scenarios developed by the Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation earlier this year, it's unlikely that public subsidies and MBTA revenues will be sufficient even to operate the system and maintain current levels of good repair over the next decade. The T currently has a deferred maintenance backlog of more than \$3 billion, and funding shortfalls cause it to grow each year.

Clearly the MBTA does not have the financial resources to build the projects mandated by the Central Artery mitigation requirements. That means they either don't get built or state taxpayers pick up the tab.

More than a decade of rapid expansion has drained the T's coffers and left it with more debt than any comparable U.S. transit agency; it's no secret that the commonwealth is broke. Yet we're about to spend \$720 million on another commuter rail line.

And not just any commuter rail line. With 47 miles of track, New Bedford/Fall River would be far longer than most area commuter rail lines. Only the Attleboro/Stoughton, Worcester, and Fitchburg lines are of similar length.

But the 8,560 daily riders the new line is projected to carry are only a third of Attleboro/Stoughton's ridership and about half what the Worcester line carries on a daily basis. Almost a third are already transit riders, not commuters now clogging Massachusetts highways.

Running empty trains over a long track doesn't come cheap, and it's the gift that just keeps on giving. Revenues for the new line are projected to cover only 37 percent of costs and New Bedford/Fall River would continue to add \$18 million to the T's annual operating deficit long after taxpayers have picked up that \$720 million construction tab.

But Senate Ways and Means Chair Mark Montigny from — you guessed it — New Bedford wants the project and had the muscle to get it included in the transportation bond bill.

In February, a [report](#) from the Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation and Pioneer Institute recommended that the commonwealth fund MBTA expansion projects. While it's encouraging to see lawmakers recognize that the T's budget can't cover both operations and expansion, it's disappointing that the first project they move to fund is the least worthy.

When our checkbooks are empty and a pile of bills about to come due, most of us pass up that unnecessary bauble in the shop window. Unfortunately, that same logic doesn't seem to apply to our elected leaders.

Charles D. Chioppo directs the Shamie Center for Restructuring Government at Pioneer Institute, a Massachusetts public policy think tank.