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HOUSING MATTERS

Back To The Future

Why Filling The North-South Rail Gap Is Good For Housing

BY SUSAN GITTELMAN

SPECIAL TO BANKER & TRADESMAN

We all look forward to the fall. Except when everything's back in full swing and you are trying to get anywhere. Traffic is on everybody's mind, and system solutions are needed to serve our region's growth plan.



SUSAN GITTELMAN

Rail transportation could be a key solution to addressing this issue, but there are limitations to the current systems with finite resources to address them. The first is the state of disrepair of the existing system, which the Baker administration has been doggedly pursuing, to its credit.

But we also need to consider whether the system can better connect where people live to job opportunities elsewhere in our region. One suggestion for a system-wide approach to enhancing commuter rail would be creating a connection between North and South stations.

Right now the two commuter rail systems serving Greater Boston don't connect.

So there's a disincentive to living north of Boston and working someplace to the south. You effectively have transit access to half of the region.

In the face of Boston's notoriously high housing costs, the limits of the transporta-

tion system only exacerbate our housing problem. People have fewer options of where they can live and still easily access jobs all over the region without driving.

"One argument for a first-rate integrated rail system is so people can live in Brockton and work in Woburn," said former Gov. Michael Dukakis. "As it is now, you've got to move." Two years ago, Dukakis and former Gov. Bill Weld came to-

gether to jump-start a discussion of building a North-South Rail Link. The Boston gap is also the only Amtrak missing link between Florida and Maine.

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An elevated rail line between the stations existed until the 1930s, when cars began to dominate. And today, bridging the gap between the two stations faces significant barriers: cost, some construction disruption and lots of lower-cost transportation priorities.

Bob O'Brien, chairman of the Citizens Advisory Committee for the North-South Rail Link Project, says connecting com-

munities north and south of Boston would create an integrated system, not just "in-and-out" commuter rail lines. Places like the region's Gateway Cities or other towns where land and housing are more reasonably priced than Boston could become attractive options for thousands more families if the system was linked. "It would connect all points to all points," O'Brien said.

This is by no means an endorsement. We know that the administration has commissioned a study of rail link benefits and cost, considering things like new tunneling technology and also weighing other worthy alternatives. Though more expensive, a North-South Rail Link might alleviate critical layover issues at South Station, rather than adding tracks there at a cost of \$2 billion to \$3 billion.

Housing Crunch

We need good data for a thoughtful discussion of any new megaproject. But

part of that discussion needs to be about whether linking the two stations would help solve our housing crunch.

According to a 2014 published state study, 68 percent of the miles traveled for work trips by people living in the Greater Boston area are in single-occupancy vehicles. Only about 17 percent of the miles of people going to work involve transit.

Now, that same study divided the region into seven radial regions, plus the Boston core. A survey of 15,000 households found that those living in regions not adjacent to the region of their workplaces drove an average of 25 miles, about twice as far those driving to the

Boston core. Even eliminating the three regions west of Boston's downtown ("Nobody is going to commute by rail from Grafton to Leominster," said one researcher), linking North and South stations would better connect commuter rail in about 45 communities north of Boston to 35 cities and towns south of Boston.

A study done 2006-2010 by the Metropolitan Area Planning Council estimated the number of people living in a community near a commuter rail station served by South Station and working in a community near a commuter rail station served by North Station at about 38,000.

According to state analysis of pos-

sible future projects, the rail link would "open up new possibilities for travel. ... It would result in the largest absolute travel time savings of any commuter rail project examined."

Transportation is a service that links where people live to where they work. Investing in its future is as relevant to housing as it is to jobs. Across the region, gridlock is becoming the status quo – something we can no longer afford. ■

Susan Gittelman is the executive director of B'nai B'rith Housing, a nonprofit, affordable housing developer working in Boston, Sudbury and Swampscott.
