



---

April 13, 2022

Allegheny Institute Op-Ed

---

700 words

### The North Shore Connector at 10

Ten years after the Port Authority of Allegheny County's North Shore Connector began operations, the mass-transit agency likely will tout the light-rail extension under the Allegheny River from downtown Pittsburgh to the near North Shore as a "success."

After all, and according to official federal accounting, it's moving thousands of commuters daily. As the authority will claim, that's exactly what it was designed to do.

But serious economic and operational efficacy questions have dogged this 1.2-mile rail extension since before service bowed on March 25, 2012. And many of the original questions regarding the connector remain valid to this day, along with a host of new questions, say researchers at the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy.

"What could be in store during the next 10 years?" ask Eric Montarti, research director at the Pittsburgh think tank, and Jake Haulk, president-emeritus there (in *Policy Brief Vol. 22, No. 14*).

Long story short, the North Shore Connector began life as a far different project, initially including a "spine line" to the David L. Lawrence Convention Center. In fact, that was the project's most utilitarian aspect. But when costs began to escalate, it was eliminated. (As was a third North Shore station and additional light-rail vehicles.) Yet the final cost remained close to what it would have ended up being *with* the spine line. Promoters then had the audacity to say the project came in on budget.

And just before the connector opened -- and in a tacit admission that the Port Authority was worried that potential riders might not be willing to pay to use the short link that heretofore had been eminently walkable -- it inked deals with four sponsors to make the new North Shore-to-Downtown segment fare-free.

But those sponsorships have not covered the cost of the connector's use. To wit, crunching National Transit Database numbers and making reasonable assumptions, the cost of providing those free rides in fiscal 2018-19 would have been close to \$5 million.

"That represents 7 percent of light-rail operating expenses that year," Montarti and Haulk note. "This cost has been minimally offset by the sponsorships."

“The rides are free to the rider, but taxpayers are paying for the labor, maintenance, utilities, etc., associated with the free trips,” stress the researchers.

Government, of course, measures “success” differently than most people. And the North Shore Connectors future “success,” no matter how it is measured or who measures it, clearly is dependent on many variables.

A 2016 Federal Transit Administration study – that, by the way, noted how “under-estimates of project costs were a persistent problem throughout the development of the North Shore Connector” -- concluded with the statement that “Port Authority predicted that 14,300 trips would use the North Shore Connector in 2025.”

“This forecast depended on various factors: the continuation of the ‘free fare zone’; the Downtown economy; North Shore development; funding to maintain service; gas prices and other factors,” Montarti and Haulk remind.

“Can anyone say today that any of these components have a clear future, including the ‘free fare zone,’ especially in light of the effect that COVID had on ridership?”

To that point, the latest data on average weekday trips for February 2022 show overall light-rail ridership is 79 percent lower than it was in February 2019.

“In 2010, the engineer in charge of the connector’s construction said ‘Our hope is that 20, 30 years down the road people will say “I don’t know what the controversy was about,”’ the think tank scholars recounted.

“Twelve years after the engineer’s comment, have people forgotten about what went into the expensive project? Will they forget about the connector cost overruns?” Montarti and Haulk add.

Additionally, they note that it is doubtful that in 2012, many knew there would be a bus rapid-transit project underway across the river.

“That project has one-half the price tag of the connector with 44 percent of the funding put up by the federal government,” versus 80 percent federal funding for the connector, Montarti and Haulk remind.

*Colin McNickle is communications and marketing director at the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy ([cmcnickle@alleghenyinstitute.org](mailto:cmcnickle@alleghenyinstitute.org)).*

---

*Op-Eds may be reprinted as long as proper attribution is given.*

Allegheny Institute for Public Policy  
305 Mt. Lebanon Blvd.\* Suite 208\* Pittsburgh PA 15234  
Phone (412) 440-0079  
E-mail: [aipp@alleghenyinstitute.org](mailto:aipp@alleghenyinstitute.org)  
Website: [www.alleghenyinstitute.org](http://www.alleghenyinstitute.org)  
Twitter: [AlleghenyInsti1](https://twitter.com/AlleghenyInsti1)