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North Shore Connector: An Expensive Misuse of Taxpayer Dollars

Those who were dismayed at the \$262 million spent on the creation of PNC Park and the predicted \$254 million on Heinz Field are in for a shock. Pittsburgh's Port Authority is in the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) stage for the creation of the estimated \$500 million North Shore Connector. This new light-rail system would run a 1.6 mile route, part of which is under the Allegheny River. The system is being built primarily for the use of a few who would like to travel by rail to and from the two new stadiums. Construction of the \$435 million (1999 dollars) system will not be started until the FEIS and the engineering study are completed-- a year from now. A more appropriate estimation would be \$481 million (predicted 2002 dollars).

Contributing to the extravagant cost of the Gateway Alternative is the fact that nearly all of the new 1.4-mile system from downtown to the North Shore must be underground in order to make the extension "seamless" with the existing system serving downtown Pittsburgh and the South Hills. While this should not be taken as an argument in favor of the system--it is incomprehensible that not one of the planners has considered that the new and old systems need not be connected seamlessly.

The plan calls for the Gateway Center Station to receive extensive renovation, including an entirely new underground station area. The new station would constitute the beginning of the 1.4-mile route with its next stop at the underground PNC Park Station. Next comes the only surface station, Steelers Way, and finally the large underground ITC (Intermodal Transportation Center) Station. To the east there would be a 2/10ths of a mile underground line that would connect the existing Steel Plaza Station to an underground station at the Convention Center.

Cleveland, Denver, San Jose, and Tacoma have or are currently planning to create light rail extensions of similar mileage to the Pittsburgh proposal. However, as shown in the table below, the Gateway LRT is significantly more expensive than the other light rail extensions.

The Gateway LRT vs. Similar Size Existing and Proposed LRT Systems

City	Project Name	Mileage	Stations	Total Cost*
Cleveland, OH	Waterfront Line	1.5 miles	5 stations	\$62.6 million
Denver, CO	Central Platte Valley	1.8 miles	4 stations	\$43 million
San Jose, CA	Tasman East	1.9 miles	3 stations	\$77.25 million
Tacoma, WA	Tacoma Link	1.6 miles	5 stations	\$77.8 million
Pittsburgh		1.6 miles		\$481 million

*Costs have been adjusted for predicted 2002 inflation

It isn't difficult to figure out why Pittsburgh's proposal is so expensive: having virtually the entire project underground, building a tunnel under the Allegheny River and putting all stations but one below ground. The other cities are not creating below ground systems.

Cleveland, Ohio. The Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority created a 1.5-mile extension, known as the Waterfront Line, which opened July 10, 1996 to connect the underground Tower City Station (in downtown) to the new Browns stadium, the Lake Erie shore, and The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. The Waterfront Line is virtually the same length, with the same number of stations and similar uses to the Gateway LRT. The difference: Cleveland spent only \$55.25 million on a 1.5-mile route with 5 new stations.

San Jose, California. The Tasman East Extension, a 1.9-mile route with 3 new stations, was a Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority project that opened on May 17, 2001. The SCVTA is currently planning further expansion to the east, and to create a Great Mall Station to service a nearby shopping center. This project cost \$75 million, or \$39 million per mile—expensive, but a bargain compared to the \$312 million per mile that Pittsburgh is planning on spending.

Tacoma, Washington. Currently under construction is the Tacoma Link, another light rail extension. The Tacoma Link will be a completely above ground system that runs from the Tacoma Theater District to a Convention Center Station, then through two more stations before ending at the Tacoma Dome Station. The Tacoma Link will be far more socially useful than Pittsburgh's extension as it will serve Amtrak customers, theater patrons, fans of the Tacoma Sabercats and those attending concerts in the Tacoma Dome—all for about one tenth the per-mile cost of the North Shore Connector.

Denver, Colorado. The Pepsi Center, home of the Avalanche and Nuggets, Invesco Field at Mile High, home of the Broncos, Coors Field (home of the Rockies), a local Auraria West Community College campus, and Elitch Gardens—location of a new Six Flags amusement park—are all stops on the Central Platte Valley LRT, Denver's light rail extension currently under construction. The extension is to be completed by March 2002, and will connect to the existing Denver light rail system. The Regional Transportation District will spend only \$43 million for the creation of an extension useful to a vast cross section of Denver's population.

There are very serious questions about the North Shore Connector: Can we afford this project? Where are the estimates of economic benefits to justify such outlandish expenditures? Surely we cannot afford to waste valuable resources when the region's other transportation needs are much more pressing.

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