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Pittsburgh's Maglev Effort Stacks Up Poorly To Competition

Pittsburgh's entry to the Federal Maglev Sweepstakes is shaky and uncertain, paling in comparison to the effort and information put forth by the competition in the Baltimore-Washington corridor. The Maryland Project would transverse 6 municipalities and counties; link three interstate, intermodal transportation centers, and serve two of the nation's largest metropolitan areas. Our project begins in a vacant shopping mall and links a relatively small Westmoreland County community to Pittsburgh and Pittsburgh International Airport.

Thus far it has been impossible to obtain definitive revenue figures, or specific cost figures from MAGLEV, Inc., the so-called "private" partner in the public-private "partnership" with the Allegheny Port Authority. Nor is the Port Authority forthcoming with numbers. Here's a side-by-side comparison of what can be determined regarding the Maryland vs. the Pennsylvania projects:

Comparison of Maglev Projects		Pittsburgh	Baltimore - Washington
Marketplace Population		2 million	7.3 million
Corridor Length		47 miles	40 miles
Estimated Daily Riders		54,800	35,400
Number of Proposed Stations		6	3
Estimated Total Project Cost		\$2.8 billion	\$3.5 to \$4 billion
Guideway Cost		\$1.8 billion	\$1.9 to \$2.2 billion
Station Costs		N/A	\$175 to \$200 million
Technology Costs		N/A	\$.980 to \$1.2 billion
Project Management Costs		N/A	\$315 to \$360 million
Other		N/A	\$140 to \$160 million
Estimated Cost Per Mile		\$59.6 million	\$88 to \$100 million
Annual Operating Costs		N/A	\$59 million
Proposed Funding Sources:	Federal	\$950 million	\$950 million
	Project Revenue Bonds	N/A	\$2 billion
	State and Local	N/A	\$500 million
	Other Private Sources	N/A	\$400 million
	TOTAL	\$950 million	\$3.85 billion
Estimated Annual Revenues		\$123 million	\$226 million
Fares:	End to End	\$20	\$26.25
	Per Segment	\$5	\$6.90 to \$19.35
	Parking	Included in Fare	Extra
	Subsidized Fares?	Yes	No

* Does Not Consider Subsidized Fares. Based on Port Authority Figures of 67,500 Daily Segment Trips @ \$5 Per Segment

Based on the detailed information provided, it seems clear that the developers of the Maryland Project are more professional and dramatically more forthcoming than has been the group contemplating bringing high speed Maglev to Pittsburgh.

Most importantly, only the Maryland group provides the information that inspires confidence their project is self sustaining and might generate the level of private investment necessary to bridge the gap between what the federal government has proposed providing and what the project will actually cost. Even so, the Maryland group admits that even the copious numbers they have provided thus far, based on expert research and actual science, will have to be upgraded to “investment quality” in order to attract private subscribers to the revenue bonds portion of their financing structure.

In Pittsburgh, undocumented claims are made and unsubstantiated numbers are bandied about. An interesting comparison can be made between these two projects by anyone who cares to visit MAGLEV, Inc.’s web site: www.maglevinc.com and then Maryland’s www.bwmaglev.com web site. The differences in the level of detail and documentation are remarkable.

And, frankly, it is remarkable that MAGLEV, Inc. remains under any sort of serious consideration at all for \$950 million in federal funds. It is impossible to escape the conclusion that they cannot deliver a finished project for \$2.8 billion. It is also clear that the estimated number of daily riders MAGLEV, Inc. has published will not stand up to scientific scrutiny. And, since the numbers needed to make any sort of serious investment decision are non-existent, there can be no credible expectation of funding from state or local government or from private sources.

The clincher is the fact that the one company in the world with the proven technology to get the job done, Transrapid International of Germany, has signed on as a partner in the Maryland Project.

Nonetheless, here the concept is being sold on the basis of a literal wheel reinvention. We’re asked to believe, in a region where manufacturing of the nature involved in this project is non-existent, that an entire technological, fabrication, construction, engineering, design and management megaplex can be created in a timely fashion if only enough money is provided.

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