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### Tunnel Vision

Pittsburgh is being slated for a “big dig” project with promises that it will produce wonderful things for the City. This project—the North Shore Connector—largely consists of a 1.2-mile extension of the light rail system from the Gateway Center station to the North Shore area with stations near PNC Park and Heinz Field. A 0.3-mile spur line from Steel Plaza station to a new station near the convention center is also planned. The cost of the project? \$363 million (80 percent from federal funds and 20 percent state and local). A recent Reason Public Policy Institute report says this will probably be the most expensive—per mile—light rail project ever undertaken in the United States.

According to the Federal Transportation Administration summary of the North Shore Connector, the forecast of ridership anticipates 16,000 boardings per weekday in 2030 implying 8,000 riders making a roundtrip. At an annual operating cost projected at \$8.5 million, the cost per rider amounts to \$5 per day. And, to that we must add the construction cost, which is conservatively estimated to be \$10 per round trip rider for the twenty years following completion. Moreover, the incremental trip to and from the North Shore will be very short in comparison to the current typical light rail passenger trip.

The FTA summary goes on to say the North Shore Connector is intended to “enhance accessibility to major sports, cultural, and civic facilities; to improve the linkage between North Shore fringe parking and Golden Triangle employment centers; and facilitate economic development in the Pittsburgh North Shore.” Let’s examine these arguments for spending over \$300 million in taxpayer money.

Justifying the North Shore Connector because it “will enhance access to major sports, and other entertainment venues,” is weak to the point of being implausible. Consider that Heinz Field hosts a mere 15 or 16 games per year and those occur on the weekend. Fans are getting to the games now by using an array of options including the Gateway Clipper shuttles, walking from remote parking sites, etc. Since all Steelers’ games are sold out, there is no indication that attendance is being suppressed by difficulties in getting to the games. These costs are obviously borne willingly by the fans--which they should be.

Meanwhile, PNC Park hosts 81 games per year and sits idle 284 days, over three quarters of the year. Given its location at the end of the Roberto Clemente Bridge, PNC Park is easily and comfortably accessible by foot from downtown parking and the existing light rail stops, especially in baseball season weather. Indeed, the bridge is closed to vehicular traffic on game days to accommodate fans who choose to park in downtown or use the light rail to the Wood Street or Gateway Center stations. Moreover, there is plenty of existing and projected supply of North Side game day parking within a short walk of the ballpark. In short, any modest

enhancement of access to North Shore sports facilities created by the light rail extension would be of negligible value to taxpayers.

Likewise, the claim that the light rail extension will improve linkage between North Shore fringe parking and Golden Triangle employment centers is not a reasonable argument. Currently, there are roughly 2,700 parking spaces available for commuters in surface lots in the area between the two stadiums. About 2,000 spaces go for \$4 per day. Included in that price is free shuttle service into the Golden Triangle. Three shuttle vehicles provide continuous service during rush hours with travel times of seven to ten minutes, depending on traffic. It is hard to imagine commuters being willing to pay a fare to ride the light rail to save a few minutes compared to the free shuttle service now available.

Inevitably, if the planned development between the stadiums actually occurs, there will be a sizable decline in the supply of affordable fringe parking for commuters. Parking rates will rise and commuters who work in the Golden Triangle will have to look for other less convenient, inexpensive parking sites.

As far as facilitating development is concerned the presence of light rail in proximity to potential office buildings and residential structures would, undoubtedly, be helpful in attracting construction and tenants. Indeed, if the benefit-cost ratio of the project is high enough, building the transit leg might be justified.

According to Continental Real Estate—the firm chosen to guide the redevelopment of the North Shore—there will be \$200 million in new construction between the stadiums with 350 apartments and six or seven office buildings along with space for retail and service shops. A couple of office projects are currently underway.

However, even if all the \$200 million in planned new construction could be directly attributable to the light rail extension—which it obviously cannot since some construction is going ahead without the extension—taxpayers will spend over \$300 million to generate only \$200 million in private construction. Because the other arguments for the light rail extension are very weak, the economic development argument has to be exceptionally strong to justify the project. However, \$300 million in construction costs and \$8.5 million per year in operating expenses to facilitate new development of less than \$200 million is simply not an efficient use of tax dollars.

There must surely be a large number of transportation projects in this region that would substantially reduce congestion bottlenecks and lower transit times in the region. In other words, the \$363 million could be put to much better use. And finally, who will be surprised when substantial cost overruns occur, making the economics of this project even less viable?

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**Jake Haulk, Ph.D. President**

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On Tuesday, March 30th, the Allegheny Institute will host a luncheon for Professor Paul Kengor of Grove City College. Dr. Kengor will talk about his new, critically acclaimed book [God and Ronald Reagan](#). Lunch will cost \$20 per person. Seating is limited so please RSVP by phone (412-440-0079) or e-mail ([aipp@alleghenyinstitute.org](mailto:aipp@alleghenyinstitute.org)) by March 15<sup>th</sup>.

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