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Deep-Six Pittsburgh's "Big Dig"

In view of the ongoing financial difficulties at the Port Authority and the many pressing transportation problems in the County and region, it is time to put an end to the North Shore Connector tunnel project. The Port Authority and the region's elected representatives--Federal, state and local--should begin an intensive effort to have the Federal dollars shifted to transportation projects that will actually produce substantial improvements in the movement of people and goods throughout the region.

The tunnel project will extend the light rail system to the North Shore and to the convention center. It will be primarily funded by Federal dollars (nearly \$290 million) but requires state and local dollars as well, bringing the entire project cost to \$363 million. If built, it will be the most expensive light rail project--on a per mile basis--in the United States to date. Though the Federal money has yet to be released, the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) has urged the Port Authority to begin soliciting bids for the work.

The major component of the project involves digging twin underground tunnels from Gateway Center in Downtown to the North Shore. The Port Authority has tried to justify this project by arguing the Connector will

- serve workers commuting to the North Shore
- improve linkages to recreational, cultural and civic facilities
- spur development on the North Shore
- be the jumping off point for light rail extensions to other parts of the County.

None of these justifications meet the most basic reasonableness test.

First, the North Shore is unlikely to become a major employment center now or in the future. At best, it will be host to no more than a couple thousand workers, many of whom are simply relocating from other parts of the City. FTA documents project passenger boardings to reach a mere 16,000 a day by the year 2030. Taking account of operating and capital costs of the Connector, the taxpayer subsidy will amount to \$15.50 per rider. Then too, only a small fraction of workers employed on the North Shore will reside in areas where they can use light rail to commute to work.

Second, using the Connector as a means of serving the baseball and football stadiums is silly considering that patrons have been finding ways to get to the games for several years and that the facilities are unused most of the year. In the case of the Steelers, games are usually held on weekends when parking and traffic are not major issues. Fans are driving to the stadium site, walking from remote lots, or using the Gateway Clipper as a way to get to the games. The baseball stadium--idle for 284 days per year--is even more accessible by foot traffic from

Downtown. The Clemente Bridge is closed to vehicular traffic on game days to accommodate fans walking from Downtown.

Additionally, the planned development for the North Shore is projected to top out at \$200 million upon completion. Spending \$300 million in transportation improvements to serve \$200 million in development is not an acceptable leveraging of tax dollars.

Lastly, the Connector is not a good solution if the ultimate intention is to build light rail to the Pittsburgh International Airport. The system would have to make a very expensive crossing back over the Ohio River at some point to get to the Airport. Why not use the existing Mon River crossing instead? Likewise, it would be very expensive to extend to the North from the stations on the North Shore.

In short, the North Shore Connector will not advance the mass transportation goals that the region's officials constantly advocate. If the argument for the project is "use it or lose it" --that is, if Federal money is available to fund transit in Allegheny County it should be used, then there should be a better return on the taxpayer investment. Instead of throwing nearly \$300 million in Federal money down the black hole that is the tunnel under the Allegheny River, there should be an effort to find acceptable alternative uses of the money.

There are several alternatives that would improve transportation in the region. One might be to use the money to build remote park and ride facilities to intercept traffic on the Parkways before the bottlenecking tunnels. This would be combined with dedicated express bus service to Downtown and other employment centers via the busways. Such a plan accomplishes two objectives: it reduces congestion at the tunnel bottlenecks and it increases the utilization of the existing and very expensive transit facilities.

Clearly, there are far more efficient ways to spend tax dollars than pouring it down the proposed tunnel dig. Rather than spending more time and political capital trying to get the dollars released for the tunnel, the area's Congressional delegation should be working on getting it approved for truly useful projects.

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