

SEPTA Commuter Plan Returns To Drawing Board

State and local transportation officials in Pennsylvania, unhappy with the Schuylkill Valley Metro line's steep price tag and uncertain return on investment, have directed Philadelphia-area transit officials to develop alternatives to the proposed commuter line.

The **Federal Transit Authority (FTA)** also appears less than enthused by the proposed \$2 billion, 62-mile system, which would connect Philadelphia with Reading, Pa., and run along the Schuylkill River Valley corridor.

The **Locally Preferred Alternative (LPA)** was selected in June 2000, but the FTA has since given the project an overall "not recommended" based on the federal New Starts share requirements. The New Starts program is part of the *Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21)*, which expired in September 2003, but was given a five-month extension by Congress last October.

Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT) Secretary Allen Biehler, along with representatives from the offices of Gov. Ed Rendell (D), Rep. Jim Gerlach (R), and Sen. Arlen Specter (R) met earlier this month to review the project status with its sponsors — the **Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA)** and the **Berks Area Reading Transportation Authority (BARTA)**.

The thrust of the meeting was to direct SEPTA and its consultants to look at phasing and financing alternatives that would allow this project to move forward, said PennDOT spokesman Rich Kirkpatrick. Government officials were primarily concerned by the plan's price tag, especially given the uncertainty surrounding how much funding the New Starts program will have in the coming authorization period.

However, Rendell continues to support the rail program, despite its weaknesses, Kirkpatrick said.

Critics Cite Frequency, Ridership

In addition to the cost, critics of the Schuylkill Valley Metro plan have also taken aim at the proposal's ridership estimates, infrastructure needs and service frequency.

"Clearly the LPA is going nowhere," said Don Nigro, president of the **Delaware Valley Association of Rail Passengers (DVARP)**. "Biehler wants SEPTA and BARTA to come up with a Plan B."

DVARP has been a vocal opponent of the LPA and other aspects of the proposal, which they view as extravagant.

During the FTA's review of the project's environmental impact

statements, the organization submitted a 73-page report deriding the plan.

One of the primary issues is the current plan to build new tracks rather than work out a shared capacity plan with **Norfolk Southern**, the Class I that owns and operates the existing freight tracks along the corridor, said Nigro. There's no need for the commuter rail to operate on dedicated tracks, he said. "There's just not that kind of capacity," he added.

The high frequency of the trains also is problematic, Nigro said. Trains would run every 15 minutes during the morning and evening rush hours, while DVARP views 30-minute headway as more reasonable. The potential ridership just doesn't exist along the corridor to make the higher frequency cost effective, he said.

Southeast Rail Plans...from page 8

becoming a reality. The 95-mile route connecting Tampa and Orlando is known as the **GreeneWay** path and runs in a median parallel to the **Central Florida GreeneWay**. The route runs south of **Orlando International Airport** directly to **Walt Disney World (UTS 11/03/03, p. 6)**.

The high-speed rail plan was passed as an amendment to Florida's constitution in November 2000, but critics maintain that little publicity and no price tag was attached to the proposal when it was put up for a vote.

But the constitutional amendment became necessary after Bush shifted \$75 million that had been allocated for the high speed rail system into a transportation outreach program in an effort to disrupt the rail plan, said FHSRA member C.C. Dockery.

Now, despite the constitutional amendment, Bush has continued to campaign against the rail system and has refused to include funding for the project in his budget. Bush vetoed funding last year that had been approved by the state Senate and House, Dockery added.

The governor has said his objections are to the FHSRA's legislated authority and the tax-exempt status being offered for development associated with the rail system. In the FY'04 budget, Bush approved \$4.9 million for the design and engineering of intermodal centers needed for the high-speed rail system, although he exercised his line-item veto power, rejecting \$7.2 million for the HSRA.

Despite this opposition, there is enough federal funding to move forward, including tapping a preferred builder, a **Fluor-Bombardier** partnership, with which the FHSRA currently is conducting contract negotiations.

It has been difficult to navigate through this process in the face of the governor's opposition, admits Dockery. "But impossible? No," he added.