



Getting the Schuylkill Valley Metro on Track

A Statement to the SEPTA Board of Directors

February 27, 2003

John Locke, the 17th century English philosopher, said, "Where all is but dream, reason and argument are of no use, truth and knowledge nothing." And, so has been the case with SEPTA's handling of the Schuylkill Valley Metro Major Investment Study. But now, the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) says that it is time to wake up. The MetroRail emperor has no clothes—something that DVARP repeatedly pointed out with great specificity to the SEPTA Board in 2000 and 2001.

Perhaps, not all of you have been apprised of this, but this is what's coming down from FTA regarding the unprecedented MetroRail, SEPTA's locally preferred alternative:

1. FTA "questions the ridership projections for MetroRail" and finds that they "are not credible." This is a fundamental problem. Ridership is a key metric by which FTA judges projects. With FTA rightfully questioning SEPTA's credibility on this, the entire MetroRail alternative—all segments of it—is in trouble;
2. FTA "is not comfortable with the cost-effectiveness of this project."
3. FTA is going to ask SEPTA to re-scope the project. In other words, FTA says that SEPTA will not get funding to build the study's present "preferred alternative". A plan B is needed if things are going to move forward; and
4. It is likely that FTA will ask for a supplemental environmental document to get things right.

Here is DVARP's study comments document submitted to FTA and SEPTA a year ago. It is 74 pages in length. FTA found this document to be quite helpful in and supportive of their findings. Much of it's content the SEPTA Board has seen in presentations from DVARP in 2000 and 2001.

The SEPTA Board of Directors is responsible for the position in which it now finds itself. In 2000 and 2001, DVARP repeatedly addressed the Board, verbally and in writing, warning of these fatal flaws of MetroRail and the light rail alternatives. Had our early warnings been heeded three years ago and the scope of the project been modified, the board could have been soon awarding construction contracts.

What is the Board's Achilles Heel in all of this? The SEPTA Board is far too deferential to SEPTA staff. Just because the planning staff is paid, it doesn't mean that their judgement is always sound or well-grounded. Every discipline involving public policy has its extremists and fringe

thinkers. Generally, SEPTA's planning staff along with SEPTA's one guiding prominent local transit academic are far from centrist or conventional when it comes to transit philosophy among their peers.

So, where to from here?

Well, just as SEPTA staff under previous management painted a rose-colored picture (to put it kindly) of MetroRail and the light rail alternatives, they painted an unattractive, cost-inflated picture of the commuter rail alternatives which by the way happen to include an extension of the Route 100 to the King of Prussia Mall. DVARP's 74-page study comments explains just how.

DVARP endorses study Alternative 2D. DVARP requests the SEPTA Board do the following:

1. Direct staff to expedite the preparation of a revised grant application by using study Alternative 2D as the starting point.;
2. Commit that from opening day, service will go all the way to Reading;
3. Resolve that should this project require any staging, it will be by frequency of service and not by geography. This is easily accommodated when the approach involves working with and enhancing the tracks that are already there rather than building a separate system. Among the more than a dozen significant commuter rail systems in North America, SEPTA's is the most truncated one. We don't need to make futile plans to spend a billion dollars just to extend the Norristown Line 12 miles. Furthermore, we would think that the Pennsylvania Legislature and U.S. Senators Specter and Santorum would not look favorably upon such a parochial approach;
4. Direct staff to ascertain during the preliminary engineering phase of the project where the inner segment of the line with separate passenger tracks, electrification, and more frequent service ought to terminate: Valley Forge, King of Prussia Mall, or Phoenixville;
5. SEPTA's Paoli Line supports frequencies of 20 minutes during the peak and 30 minutes during the off-peak. Direct staff to evaluate during preliminary engineering the same level of service for the electrified inner segment of the Schuylkill Valley Metro. The board must demand the appropriate technology and operating plan for each segment of the corridor and to work within a paradigm of what is cost-effective and fundable;
6. Undo staff's slanting of the study that made Alternative 2D look less attractive and more costly. Details and guidance are found in our 74-page comments document; and finally
7. Invite DVARP into future staff dealings on this project so that the Board can be much better apprised of its options.

Optimally crafted, Alternative 2D surely would get the strongest recommendations from FTA. In addition, Alternative 2D would be the one which would require the least amount of local funds. To quote a local business leader, “[y]ou can be absolutely certain that any notion of a [regional assessment] district tax to pay for this thing is dead on arrival.”

The MetroRail alternative never had a chance of being funded and built. Now it's up to you, the board, to exercise your policy-making authority and set a course for SEPTA to engineer and build an attractive, credible, and cost-effective public transit system to King of Prussia, Pottstown and Reading. If we optimize MIS Alternative 2D as the basis for a revised grant application, we can get this project back on track.