

The Philadelphia Daily News, February 25, 2000

Ignoring free advice?

SEPTA consultants get another 400G

*by Chris Brennan
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The cost to study SEPTA's proposed Schuylkill Valley Metro increased by almost \$400,000 yesterday, as a regional passenger group warned the transit agency it was thinking of spending too much on the rail project.

The Delaware Valley Association of Rail Passengers last month asked SEPTA to compare its possible project costs with other commuter rail extensions around the country.

The Schuylkill Valley Metro line would feature rail stations from Philadelphia to Reading.

Don Nigro, DVARP's president, told SEPTA's board yesterday he never heard any more about his request. DVARP is involved in studying the plan with SEPTA.

So DVARP did the comparison.

The group found SEPTA's plans are "most likely very overpriced," Nigro said.

SEPTA is considering options of light rail, like a trolley, or heavy rail, like commuter trains, for the 62-mile rail line.

DVARP looked at nine heavy rail proposals across the nation and found a Colorado plan to link Denver to Boulder had the highest costs - 28 miles of track costing \$10.4 million a mile.

SEPTA has told DVARP how much their proposals would cost per mile. Nigro would not divulge that price, but said the Colorado proposal is "significantly less per mile."

DVARP also studied 13 light rail proposals and found the most expensive in California, linking San Diego with Mission Valley - 5.8 miles of track for \$74.3 million a mile. The passenger group is concerned SEPTA will go with a light rail line, despite the cost.

DVARP prefers a "dual mode" system for the Schuylkill Valley Metro - heavy rail commuter trains pulled by diesel locomotives from Reading to Philadelphia, where they would switch over to electric propulsion before entering the Center City Commuter Tunnel.

The board, in its monthly meeting yesterday, approved paying Urban Engineers Inc. \$398,000 to keep studying the rail project's options for another five months.

That company was originally hired in 1998 to study the proposed project for 21 months. With the extension, Urban Engineers' contract has reached \$4.2 million.

Tom Dorricott, a spokesman for the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, praised DVARP's rail study and its cost.

"I think you've done a lot of very good work on the Schuylkill Valley Metro issue and you've done it for nothing, unlike some of the consultants here," the union spokesman said. ■