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Cost cuts eyed for rail line

A Berks delegation looks for ways to move forward on the proposed Schuylkill Valley Metro. A better bottom line could help.

By Kori Walter, Eagle/Times

HARRISBURG Using a combination of diesel- and electric-powered trains and running trains on just two tracks could reduce the cost of a proposed \$1.4 billion commuter rail line between Reading and Philadelphia, a state transportation official said Tuesday.

Richard J. Peltz, PennDOT deputy secretary for local and area transportation, who met with the Berks County delegation to the Legislature, said the savings haven't been determined yet.

Rep. Thomas R. Caltagirone, a Reading Democrat, arranged the meeting in his Harrisburg office to discuss how to get the proposed 62-mile Schuylkill Valley Metro rail line up and running.

Peltz suggested lowering the project cost might help.

"We need to find a way to build a smooth running Ford instead of a Cadillac," Peltz said.

BARTA and the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority are proposing to use electric trains only and running those trains on four tracks.

"We're not trying to second-guess SEPTA," Peltz said. "We've got to sit down and discuss with all the leaders what is reasonable and what we can afford."

Money could be saved using diesel units because power lines needed for electric trains would not have to be built along the tracks, Peltz said.

Operating on just two tracks would allow trains to run on existing Norfolk Southern tracks, eliminating the need to build additional tracks or rebuild underpasses to accommodate passenger service, Peltz added.

Though he was unsure of the total savings, Peltz estimated it would cost just \$200 million to start passenger rail service. Peltz stressed that does not mean the entire project would cost \$1.2 billion less than the plan favored by BARTA and SEPTA.

Additional equipment and other costs would increase the \$200 million start-up expenditure, he said.

BARTA Executive Director Dennis D. Louwense said in a phone interview after the meeting that planners had considered using diesel trains.

"We don't think it's the most appropriate way to provide this service," Louwense said.

That's because diesel trains are largely unproven in the U.S., he said.

Operating a combination of diesel and electric trains could also cause delays because diesel trains cannot accelerate as fast, Louwense said.

However, Louwense remained optimistic the differences could be worked out and would not jeopardize the project.

"I'm well aware that PennDOT has a number of issues concerning this project, both from a technical point of view and from a financial point of view, but none of these substantive issues are unanticipated," Louwense said.

Peltz said he plans to meet Feb. 1 with Louwense and SEPTA general manager John K. Leary to discuss the rail-line options.

The rail project has bipartisan support among members of the Berks delegation.

"There's an area of economic development everywhere it (the train) stops," said Rep. Dennis Leh, an Amity Township Republican and a house transportation committee member.

Most members said they would support Caltagirone's plan to put \$140 million for the project in the 2001-02 capital budget.

"I think it's something we have to do to jump-start the process," Rep. Dante Santoni Jr., a Reading Democrat and a house transportation committee member.

The capital budget is considered a legislative wish-list of projects. Gov. Tom Ridge has the final say on which projects are funded.

"The danger of putting it in the capital budget is it sometimes builds false hopes for the people," said Rep. Sheila Miller, a Tulpehocken Township Republican. "That is just the tip of the iceberg."

PennDOT also will play a role in determining if the project gets off the ground, said state Sen. Michael A. O'Pake, a Reading Democrat.

"I think it's an important project," O'Pake said. "It's clear from the meeting that PennDOT wants some re-evaluation of costs. We can put this on a wish-list, but PennDOT will decide if it flies."