

Study: Ridership there for rail project

Nonprofit group labels the SEPTA proposal 'radical'

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The Schuylkill Valley Metro plan has the projected ridership to support development of SEPTA's first extended rail service in years.

So says the first feasibility study to look at the proposed rail line that would serve 31 municipalities from Philadelphia to Reading.

The study, released this week, looked at potential ridership levels, costs and implementation strategies of a light rail system (64 miles) vs. a commuter/regional rail system (73 miles) that would include a light rail component in the city.

In the study, the light rail proposal is modeled after SEPTA's Route 100, while the commuter rail system is based on SEPTA regional R-6 line that runs from Norristown to Center City.

SEPTA's new general manager, John K. Leary Jr., has experience in reinventing transit systems, and the Valley Metro project could ostensibly help revitalize SEPTA.

Bernard F. Cohen, who heads SEPTA's strategic business development operations, called it a visionary project with an impact that will be felt 50 years out.

But this visionary project will send SEPTA looking for a lot of new dollars to fund it.

A commuter rail system is estimated to

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president of railroad watchdog group

● cost \$403 million to build vs. \$720 million for light rail. Light rail would require separate tracks to be built, while a commuter line can share freight rail.

And it's up to Conrail Inc.'s new owners, CSX and Norfolk Southern, to grant SEPTA rights for the railroad's Harrisburg Main Line, which makes up the bulk of the route. Although Norfolk has expressed its intent to cooperate with SEPTA, no formal agreement has been signed.

"While commuter rail is easier [to build] than light rail because it's already set up, light rail assumes we are running on streets of Philadelphia, which is a challenge," Cohen said.

To some, it came as a surprise that the transit authority would even consider light rail for such a long distance.

"We think what they are proposing for light rail is radical," said Donald Nigro, president of the Delaware Valley Association of Railroad Passengers, a Philadelphia-based nonprofit watchdog group.

The group isn't opposed to light rail, Nigro said. In fact, it advocates its use to expand routes like the Route 100 to serve the King of Prussia Mall area and Port Kennedy, where the cost is less and the potential for return greater.

"But no light rail line in North America extends more than 22 miles from its region's central business district," he said.

The cost structure of light rail limits its length, and sparsely populated rural areas limit its ridership, he said.

In terms of ridership, light rail is projected to attract 30,500 riders, and of that, 17,100 are expected to be new transit users. Commuter rail riders would number about 20,000, including about 4,800 new riders, according to the study.

The study also said:

✓ Riders tend to look at issues of comfort, cost, travel time and frequency when traveling. The proposed light rail will be even narrower than commuter rail, making it similar to the comfort of riding the Market-Frankford Line. Fares will be similar to existing fares, with slightly higher rates for commuter rail. And the travel time is estimated at 15 minutes more for commuter rail, which makes more stops.

✓ The big plus for light rail is that it can run more frequently and carry more riders. During peak service, light rail could operate four trains per hour from Philadelphia to Wyomissing, compared to two trains per hour for commuter.

✓ Cost differences are only slight between operating the two rail systems. A

commuter rail's projected gross annual operating costs is \$29 million vs. \$28 million for light rail. Additional labor and the cost of complying with Federal Railroad Association rules make a commuter rail system more expensive.

✓ Light rail requires just an engineer to operate the train and relies on automated fares, while commuter rail currently uses an engineer and several conductors to collect fares. But this, too, could change because SEPTA is in the process of modernizing its fare collection system.

SEPTA will hold a series of public forums in coming weeks and, based on the recommendations of the feasibility study, is expected to order a more detailed study. ●



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