



The Patriot-News

Transit proposal fails to add up

Corridor One's backers are off on numbers

Sunday, September 02, 2007

BY ALLEN D. BIEHLER

Given the strong record of Gov. Edward G. Rendell and the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation under my direction on behalf of public transit, it is time to talk factually about the Corridor One passenger rail proposal, especially since The Patriot-News on July 19 accused me of being "the final insurmountable barrier" to the project. I also was accused of not believing the ridership estimates.

It should be clear to all that Gov. Rendell and I have demonstrated unwavering support for public transit in all its forms. At the governor's direction, I headed the Transportation Funding and Reform Commission, which had a mission to stabilize transit funding and which, in its final report, made clear the importance that Pennsylvania have effective, statewide public transportation.

We have taken several steps that benefited transit options in the Harrisburg region:

In 2005, the governor worked with the Metropolitan and Rural Planning Organizations to flex federal dollars to stabilize transit operations around the state until a long-range funding solution could be found. His actions drew intense criticism from many quarters.

When Capital Area Transit was unable to take advantage of the flexing option, PennDOT worked out a supplemental arrangement that provided CAT with \$2.25 million over 18 months to maintain operations.

The governor worked with Amtrak to rejuvenate an agreement that brought high speed, 90-minute service to the Keystone Corridor from Harrisburg to Philadelphia. As the state has invested in this corridor, the ridership has grown. The Keystone Corridor service operated by Amtrak already provides hourly commuter rail service in the morning, late afternoon and evening on exactly the same tracks between Harrisburg and Lancaster that Corridor One proposes to use.

While Corridor One's supporters have mounted an intense campaign on the project's behalf, there comes a point where the numbers behind the proposal do matter.

We are at that point.

According to Capital Area Transit's ridership projections, not mine, adding the trains to be operated by Corridor One to the existing Amtrak service would attract 444 one-way passengers or 222 round-trip riders a day. This operation is expected to recover \$486,000 a year in fare revenue, or a paltry 4 percent of the projected \$12 million operating cost in 2010. By 2015, the cost recovery is projected to improve to 6 percent, still far below Capital Area Transit's 40 percent cost recovery on its current operations.

The resulting \$11.5 million annual deficit would require a \$92.60 taxpayer subsidy for each and every passenger trip. By comparison, the existing 104-mile Keystone Corridor Service requires a \$10 to \$12 subsidy per passenger trip and Philadelphia's regional rail requires \$4 to \$5 per passenger trip. Harrisburg's CAT system provides service at a subsidy level of about \$3.50 per passenger trip.

For another perspective, each round-trip Corridor One rider would require an annual subsidy amounting to \$51,800. It would be cheaper to lease each rider a car and pay for downtown parking, fuel,

maintenance and insurance.

CAT carries about 8,000 daily passengers and will receive \$5 million in annual state subsidy under the new transportation funding plan. Corridor One would need \$11.5 million annually to carry its projected 444 daily passengers.

The new state transportation funding law, Act 44 of 2007, has a section for new rail initiatives. However, the section has requirements.

Two examples are: There must be a reasonable return on investment. here must be a local dedicated funding commitment to pay local match for the project and ongoing operating costs.

In other words, the project must make absolute sense to qualify for state funding and the region must put up money to back up the talk. Pennsylvania taxpayers demand no less an approach to ensure their money is being invested wisely.

If the local Metropolitan Planning Organization, the Harrisburg Area Transportation Study, wants to provide a subsidy to help underwrite Corridor One, we will be happy to work with HATS on making that happen. It must be sufficient so that the state's contribution is on a par with other similar systems.

There was no provision in the new transportation funding law to merely give Corridor One's backers in excess of \$10 million a year because they believe the project to be worthwhile. I will leave it to others to decide the merits of paying \$51,000 annually for each round-trip rider for this service. I, however, could not justify paying that amount.

ALLEN D. BIEHLER, P.E., is secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation.

©2007 The Patriot-News

© 2007 PennLive.com All Rights Reserved.