Editorial

East-West rail must be part of state’s future

If you want to kill a good idea, there’s a tried and true formula: Low-ball the benefits and inflate the costs.

And so when state transportation officials put out the latest set of numbers on six alternatives for commuter rail service between Boston and Springfield — or possibly as far as Pittsfield — they generated more than a little skepticism from proponents.

With Boston-centric thinking dominating Beacon Hill, there is certainly reason to doubt that the state’s western communities are getting a fair shake when it comes to transportation spending.

But as housing costs in Boston and its surrounding burbs rise through the stratosphere and traffic congestion grows exponentially, there are growing reasons to acknowledge that civilization does not come to a screeching halt in Worcester.

And yet to look at the state’s transportation system you would think that’s exactly the case. Passenger rail currently goes no farther west than Worcester’s Union Station, except for a single daily Amtrak train that runs to Springfield (actually en route to Chicago). And yet, rumor has it, hundreds of thousands of people live, work, go to school, and even vacation in those western counties.

Heck, isn’t there a resort casino in Springfield? Yes, MassDOT is currently studying the issue of an East-West rail link. In fact, its consultants have come up with six possible alternatives, varying widely in cost, speed, and route.

The cheapest alternative — simply adding a track along an existing CSX freight line between Worcester and Springfield, with only bus service extending to Pittsfield — was estimated to cost $2 billion. But the more than four-hour trip, they estimated, would attract a paltry 36 new daily one-way riders. Five of the six alternatives come in under $10 billion.

The sixth, a high-speed electrified line that could make the trip between Boston and Pittsfield in a little over two hours (79 minutes between Springfield and Boston) would cost some $25 billion, the report notes. That would attract some 820 new commuters a day. And because sticker-shock is a great weapon, the report calculates a capital cost of $51,074 per annual rider trip plus $86.1 million in annual operating and maintenance costs.

A new rail line of some 150 miles is going to be costly — and will surely need a federal subsidy. But proponents insist that commuter projections are way off. In fact, a 2016 study of the Northern New England Intercity Rail Initiative projected 100,000 new riders would use a Boston-Springfield link.

There are plenty of reasons not to kill this project in the cradle, not the least of which would be the value of having it at least on the drawing board should there be a new round of federal infrastructure money on the table.

“This project is really about vision and how we use assets in different parts of the state to help each other,” said state Senator Eric Lesser of Longmeadow. “This is the answer to Boston’s housing problem.”

While the median housing price in the state recently hit $400,000, the median housing price in Hampden County is $200,000. But how to get from that $200,000 home to that job in Kendall Square?

“The whole point of this [rail] project is to change the pattern in this state,” Lesser added. “The [MassDOT] study did not take that into account. If we have fast, reliable transportation, people will use it.”

And if the state is ever to reach its lofty 2050 environmental goals, it will have to get more cars off the road. That means extending the state’s commuter rail system into what today might seem unlikely places.

There are a host of other transportation projects — most in the Greater Boston area — that are going to take priority to deal with the current traffic congestion crisis: finishing the Green Line extension, electrifying the Fairmount Line, finishing South Coast rail. But those are this year’s needs.

Transit is — and always has been — about looking far into the future, planning for the generation ahead and the generation after that. East-West rail must be part of that mix.