

## SO MUCH MORE THAN A TRAIN

Steve Smith, November 2009

Here in the South Coast, we have been asking, cajoling, lobbying and demanding a commuter rail connection to Boston for over two decades. We have endured doubletalk and setbacks so often that some have been tempted to abandon this dream altogether.

Even today, we are still short of our destination, with major hurdles still to overcome – most notably the approval of a preferred route by federal agencies and a financial plan to pay for the project.

Nevertheless, we are making our way through the tunnel and daylight may soon come into view. For this progress we need to thank Governor Patrick and the South Coast Rail project, which, at the very least, has provided an accurate if arduous roadmap to follow on this journey.

There have been some interesting side trips along the way, including most recently the release of the South Coast Rail Economic Development and Land Use Corridor Plan. This report with the unmanageable title is a key milestone for this project and will be a pleasant and productive side trip and one that will move us closer to our ultimate destination. This plan will insure that we maximize the investment and reap the full benefits from the railroad.

One of the fears of South Coast Rail is that it will produce rapid growth in the form of sprawl eating up precious open space and farmland. The Corridor Plan is our insurance against that fate. It is the guide for each city and town to reap the rewards from South Coast Rail, whether they are directly on the route or not.

Perhaps the greatest benefit of this project is the promotion of new investment opportunities around the proposed stations in Fall River, New Bedford, Freetown, Taunton and other communities (depending upon the route chosen). There is great potential for revitalization in the cities and smart new development in the less developed locations. But this will not be the same development we have been seeing in Southeastern Massachusetts for decades. It will be transit oriented development characterized by high density housing with a small retail component. To serve the train riders, it will include some upscale housing and bring new economic vitality to the area where it is located.

The Corridor Plan includes conceptual development plans around the Fall River Depot Station (Davol St.), Assonet (South Main St.), New Bedford Whale's Tooth and King's Highway locations, and three potential Taunton locations. These station areas will be the new hubs of activity along the rail corridor.

We desperately need more housing choices in the region if we are to become economically sustainable. Today, only one third of our region's households are

traditional families with husband, wife and kids, and yet 84% of our housing stock is being built for this segment. Other households like retirees and DINKs (double income no kids) are not seeing their needs met in the current market. Transit oriented development will help fill that need and keep and attract these people to our region.

The Corridor Plan lays out the strategy for meeting that need, both around the stations and in other priority development areas. It also explicitly addresses the need for open space and environmental protection by identifying dozens of priority protection areas throughout Southeastern Massachusetts. These areas were chosen based upon an extensive civic engagement process that was part of South Coast Rail. These priority development areas and priority protection areas represent the core of the Corridor Plan.

We have been asking the state for rail service for a long time, and we are expecting the state and feds to lay out more than a billion dollars to get it done. It is our obligation as a region to make sure that the state gets a return on its investment in the form of good development and a better region overall. The South Coast Rail Economic Development and Land Use Corridor Plan is the vision that will make that happen.

To see the Corridor Plan in full, go to: [www.southcoastrail.com](http://www.southcoastrail.com).

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