HUB OR CUL-DE-SAC?

By Frederick S. Breimyer, Ph.D
Chief Economist and Senior Vice President of State Street Corporation

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The history of major and transforming rail projects spanning the second half of the 19th to early 20th century includes, of course, the Transcontinental Railroad with its Golden Spike, the Trans-Canadian Railroad (Canadian Pacific), and the immensely long Trans-Siberian Railroad, to name but a few. There is one such project, however, dating from this period that remains unbuilt and for which eventual success has been elusive—the Trans-Bostonian Railroad. (Over the past decade Great Britain has even joined rails with France by tunneling under the English Channel, while somehow we in Boston are unable to get across town to the Charles.) Certainly, this has proven to be the longest (missing) mile in railroading, measured in time, if not distance.

I was musing about this the other day when I thought of Charlie. You remember Charlie of the MTA—"Oh, did he ever return? No, he never returned, and his fate is still unlearned. He may ride forever beneath the streets of Boston. He is the man who never returned." It was 1949 and Charlie lacked the requisite nickel to exit the Orange Line. The Kingston Trio popularized the song, but now 50 years later if they were to pick up the refrain, it would go differently if Charlie hopped onto Commuter Rail to go across town without examining the schedules. "Oh, did he ever arrive? No, he never arrived and we are not sure he survives. He may sit forever in a rail yard in Boston. He's the man who never arrived."

Well, it is kind of amusing in its own way—this continuing inability to get across town using the otherwise considerable rail assets that Boston has, which extend to the north and west of the city, and to the south and west of the city, but don't interconnect. These are two halves that don't make a whole. As a result, these are two halves that require a hole.

Why don't we have a joining of North Station with South Station? First, let me raise a quibble or two. These are terminals, not stations, and we hope that being such is not, in fact, terminal. Secondarily, almost no one wants to travel between the two per se. That is, the goal is to go beyond these two stations by going between them. To proponents of this project, I would emphasize that there is some confusing of the "what" with the "how." The "what" is to be able to travel by rail to and through Boston; the "how" is the construction of the connecting tunnel between the two stations.

I have to break it to you. Boston cannot be the "Hub of the Universe" for, in a rail context, it is not even a hub.

So, how do we best approach this subject? First, let us start with some economics, then some history and finally a view of the future. Rail is one of three modes providing transportation services. Putting aside freight, passenger rail serves a supporting role with motor vehicles and air transporta-

tion. Motor vehicles in most areas are clearly the dominant provider of local transportation, while air is the dominant long-distance carrier. Rail is both supplemental to and complementary with the other two modes. Put differently, rail is not free-standing. It is integrated into a larger system that provides a wide variety of transportation services. When evaluating how well the transportation system works, one needs to see it in an interactive context rather than separately viewing its parts.

The rationale for having an integrated transportation system is basic. People travel for reasons, and those reasons are typically for business or for pleasure. Transportation services are utilized in the context of people making broader choices. Those choices involve what they do, where they work and where they live.

Let's look at the last two as they relate to the Boston metropolitan area. Obviously, one set of choices that people face is to choose a residence and employment that are compatible with each other. In Boston, that becomes a great challenge than in many other areas because of the greater density of the population, the difficulty of traversing streets and the often highly congested road network, and the inability to use commuter rail to get from the south side of the city to the north side. To an economist, the lack of rail connectivity translates into a structural inefficiency that limits the size of the natural labor market. In effect, the absence of a rail connector is a form of a tax paid for by individuals and businesses alike. An employer on the north side of the city, say MGH, has greater difficulty tapping the labor pool in southern and some western suburbs, while an employer such as State Street has the same problem in reverse. Inadequate rail transportation also contributes to higher housing costs as the population seeks to avoid harsh commutes by clustering close to primary job centers.

So, it is about markets—markets for transportation services operating in conjunction with other business related decisions regarding where to locate, grow, and for employees, where to live and, possibly, raise a family.

Now, some history, as the issue is hardly new. *Titanic Railroad—The History of the Southern New England* by Larry Lowenthal recounts the role of the Grand Trunk Railroad and Boston's travails in this regard[1]. The New Haven gained control of the Boston and Maine by 1910. While this was primarily driven by the New Haven's attempt to control the market, with J. P. Morgan interests providing financing, there was a secondary purpose of rationalizing New England's rail assets. Recognizing and dealing with redundancy was in order, but so, too, was gaining connectivity, south to north, as that connectivity did not exist. In western Massachusetts, the New Haven built a connecting railroad, the Hampden Railroad, to connect with the Boston and Maine. In the east, plans were made to do likewise. In this regard, a Boston City Planning Board map of 1914 shows the proposed tunnels connecting the two stations.[2] Ultimately, New Haven's control of the Boston and Maine slipped away under pressure from the Interstate Commerce Commission and press coverage of the hearings that held in 1913 that showed the New Haven financially impaired.

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[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Southern_New_England_Railway

[2] http://maps.bpl.org/id/m8695

As we consider the future, this is probably where we should learn something from the past. First, some impressions, history-based. Fiber optic cable installations in 2000 recall railroad construction in the 1830s. Rail transportation then was a transforming technology as large as the communication technologies of today. Rail supported industrialization; the internet supports globalization. Both are profound in their implications and disruptive of previous production methods and income distribution. In this new and coming environment, it will not be enough to be "competitive"; we need also to be attractive. An integrated transportation system that includes rail travel to and through Boston would be a good step forward. It would also facilitate air travel at Logan and Green airports.

Connecting North and South Stations offers an opportunity for us to help ourselves. It is high time that we do so.