

Guest View: Now is the time for South Coast Rail

By Jon Mitchell, William Flanagan, and Tom Hoye
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Members of a state legislative conference committee have been working hard to reconcile competing House and Senate transportation financing bills. As mayors of the three largest SouthCoast communities, we feel compelled to make our voices heard at this critical juncture because the work of the conferees may have lasting consequence for South Coast Rail, a project long sought by our respective communities.

We urge the conferees to agree on a final measure that will allow the South Coast Rail Project to move forward. And not just for the sake of our communities, but for the commonwealth as a whole. South Coast Rail will connect workers with jobs, and families with housing, and will broaden economic opportunity across Massachusetts — and do it all without worsening congestion on overcrowded highways and local roads.

The statewide list of infrastructure needs is a long one and not every project can be a priority. Priority projects must be those that represent innovative solutions with the potential to dramatically accelerate economic growth. By that measure, South Coast Rail more than passes the test.

South Coast Rail will restore rail after a long hiatus to a region with a talented but currently underutilized labor force; provide new access to housing that families can afford; and connect cities that are now dependent on crowded highways like Route 24, I-95 and I-93. Most importantly, it will stimulate private spending four times greater than what the public will invest. This was the logic behind the state's acquisition of the primary corridor for South Coast Rail just a few years ago, and it's why the project has continued to advance steadily through the initial stages of design.

As elected officials, we understand that every project is subject to public debate and must be weighed against other needs. But as any business owner knows, to grow, you must invest. Massachusetts must choose growth in this competitive global economy. Employers need a workforce within commuting distance, where housing prices are within reach, and the quality of life is attractive. Connecting Boston to New Bedford, Fall River, Taunton and other communities in the region just makes good business sense. Again, that is good for Boston, and good for residents of SouthCoast.

Given ever-present fiscal and economic uncertainties, it is often tempting when developing public policies to proceed cautiously and perhaps wait for better times. But we say emphatically: Now is not the time to hesitate on South Coast Rail. Critical transportation investments are being made in forward-thinking places around the world, and Massachusetts cannot afford to be outpaced by the competition. We know the quality of our workforce, and we have a mandate to build a bright future. So let's together pursue a vision of what our commonwealth should be, with a commitment to sound development, and a statewide partnership focused on growth and opportunity.

Now is the time to get it right for SouthCoast and for the entire commonwealth.

Jon Mitchell is mayor of New Bedford, William Flanagan is mayor of Fall River and Tom Hoyer is mayor of Taunton.