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Officials Endorse Silver Line Tunnel

By Mac Daniel
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Transportation and business leaders yesterday announced an agreement on a plan to connect the Silver Line bus service routes by building a mile-long tunnel under downtown from the intersection of Tremont and Charles streets to South Station.

The proposal hammered out by city and state transportation officials, the MBTA, and downtown business leaders was reached after the project was put on hold seven months ago because of community opposition to another tunnel proposal linking the two Silver Line surface routes. But some residents said yesterday they had been kept in the dark by the planners and vowed to oppose the new tunnel, unless they are guaranteed that it will not damage the fragile foundations of local buildings. "We're extraordinarily disappointed," said Mark Slater, president of the Bay Village Neighborhood Association, which abuts the route of the proposed tunnel, which will cost hundreds of millions of dollars. Slater said residents and engineers whom they had hired met with T officials Wednesday to discuss the proposal, but the group was not informed at that meeting that planners had decided that the new proposal was the preferred route.

"Right now, we feel that our faith in the T has been severely broken," he said.

The plan, the third major proposal for completing the Silver Line, still needs federal approval. One previous proposal called for a tunnel entrance in a different location, and another had buses traveling the downtown route on surface streets.

The latest version calls for the tunnel to start at a portal at Tremont and Charles streets and connect the existing Silver Line routes: one that goes from Dudley Square to Downtown Crossing and a newer route that links South Station to Logan International Airport. The plan would mean that buses traveling to Downtown Crossing would bypass the tunnel and use surface streets, as they do now, while others would head underground to South Station.

The connection is considered critical for the project's success, which promised a fast, one-seat ride from Roxbury to the South Boston Waterfront and Logan. Silver Line critics have said the route is nothing more than a bus masquerading as light rail. When the elevated Orange Line was torn down in the 1987, transportation planners promised that the Silver Line would provide rapid transit along the corridor.

Unlike the first tunnel proposed, the new route would avoid disrupting emergency vehicles around New England Medical Center. T officials also said they believe new tunnel would have minimal impact on ground water levels around Bay Village, where stable ground water levels are necessary to preserve building foundations.

But, construction of the tunnel, which would be done either by burrowing or by "cut and cover," in which surface streets are excavated and then covered when the tunnel is complete, will probably create traffic headaches for a city only now recovering from two decades of Big Dig construction. If all goes according to plan, construction could start around 2009 and finish by 2013 or 2014, officials said.

House Speaker Salvatore F. DiMasi, who represents the area, said yesterday he continues to support state Transportation Secretary John Cogliano's proposal for a surface link. Cogliano's plan, proposed last month, had little neighborhood impact and saved about \$700 million in construction costs.

"I fully support that effort and encourage the administration to not reject it without giving it the same level of attention and consideration that the alternative unveiled [yesterday] receives," he said in a prepared statement.

Cogliano, who attended yesterday's announcement, said he supported the new plan. MBTA General Manager Daniel A. Grabauskas praised him for "jump-starting the project" with his proposal.

The project had been tabled by Grabauskas in August because of community opposition. Cogliano's plan was seen by many as further complicating an already controversial plan, which must be approved by federal transportation officials to get 60 percent of its financing from Washington.

Grabauskas said the project, which was introduced to some community groups and legislative leaders over the last two days, appears to have overwhelming support. The proposal will not require the taking of Elliot Norton Park, as past proposals did. Grabauskas said the park could be expanded if the T acquires the Church of All Nations, the round brick building at the corner of Charles and Tremont, as a staging area for tunnel construction. After the tunnel is complete, the area would be added to the parkland, doubling its size, he said.

Officials associated with the Church of All Nations could not be reached for comment, either by phone or at the church. The church temporarily closed in 2003 and has not reopened.

David Moy, agency director for the Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center, said the latest concept was workable, involved minimal land acquisitions, and left Elliot Norton Park intact, one of the few pieces of open space near Chinatown. But, he warned, "the devil is in the details because each neighborhood has legitimate claims."

Grabauskas said the proposal may also cut the project's \$770 million price tag, though he would not say what the new price would be. He said the plan will now be put into the pipeline for federal funding and preliminary engineering.

City officials say they support the MBTA's proposal and are happy the project is moving forward after so many delays.

"We're excited that the Silver Line project is back on track," said Thomas Tinlin, acting commissioner of the Boston Transportation Department. "It's very difficult to locate a portal in the city of Boston."

Tinlin said the city wants to continue discussions with community groups to discuss issues regarding the portal's location.

Richard A. Dimino, president of the Artery Business Committee, had come out strongly against Cogliano's plan, but said he is now "very pleased with the new proposal."

US Representative Michael E. Capuano, Democrat of Somerville, hailed the latest Silver Line plans. "This portal-alignment selection holds the greatest promise for successfully addressing both transportation needs and community concerns," he said. "Completing this transit link to Dudley Square is an issue of basic fairness and will provide access to the expected jobs and economic growth in the South Boston Seaport District."

John Shostak, co-owner of City Antiques on Tremont Street, near the proposed tunnel entrance, was unexcited.

"If I owned the space, it would be something else," he said, adding that he rents. "I have a year left on my lease, and whatever they do, I'll act accordingly."