

The Boston Globe

Silver into dross

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IT IS unthinkable to imagine downtown Boston thriving without its system of rapid transit tunnels. Phase III of the Silver Line would be the first addition to this underground system in nearly a century. Construction of a new tunnel should not be preempted by state Transportation Secretary John Cogliano's proposal to run the Silver Line buses on clogged surface roads.

The MBTA has run into difficulties trying to find a location for the portal where buses would enter the tunnel. Tufts-New England Medical Center and Bay Village residents have expressed opposition. **But the Artery Business Committee has been working on an alternative, at Marginal Road and Tremont Street, to address many of these concerns.**

Cogliano's proposal, a surface route from Kneeland Street to the Surface Artery to Essex Street, would worsen congestion and cause the buses to stack up.

The whole point of the Silver Line Phase III is to create a quick, seamless link among Roxbury, the South End, downtown Boston, the South Boston waterfront, and Logan Airport. A surface alternative would maintain this one-seat ride, but at the cost of frequent delays and unreliable service.

The first subway tunnel in Boston, and the United States, was built in 1897 under Tremont Street precisely because there was too much traffic aboveground. Construction of the Red, Orange, and Blue line tunnels followed until, by 1916, people traveling through downtown had a network of alternatives to the motor vehicles that were coming to dominate city streets.

Cogliano thinks his plan would save \$700 million of the \$800 million cost of the tunnel, an enormous amount to be sure. But who today knows what the earlier tunnels cost. They have proved their worth over the century, and so will the Silver Line, if the downtown link is built underground. The tunnel is an even better value because it is a contender for 60 percent federal funding. The MBTA put the application on hold last August while it tries to site the portal.

Cogliano apparently advanced his proposal without consulting the rest of the Romney administration, which needs to reject his alternative, encourage a portal solution, and restart the application process.

One criticism of Silver Line I, through Roxbury and the South End, is that it's only a bus line. Riders on Silver Line II, through the tunnel under the waterfront, know that it is much more. Connecting the two via the Phase III tunnel would increase the effectiveness of both sections and demonstrate that public transit remains the great people mover in downtown Boston.