

In defense of commuter rail

Paula Walach

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To the editor:

In response to the letter from Jim Rose, printed in the Saturday, Feb. 23, edition:

It seems like Mr. Rose's thinking and finding solutions to our region's traffic woes stems from right-wing think tanks like the Cato Institute, the Heritage Foundation and their anti-passenger rail, pro-highway policies.

I have to ask what commuter rail expansion has there been in the last 20 years or so? It was once spoken about, with talk of building a commuter rail line directly paralleling Route 128. It would have become a ring connecting the existing commuter rail lines radiating out of Boston. Most European cities have a ring system of subway or even commuter rail around metropolitan cities/regional areas. They are also electrified, for the most part, for faster service and efficiency in acceleration. Hence, we not only needed that North-South rail link 20 years ago, but also a rail ring around Boston or even I-495.

With commuter rail there could be more intermodalism with other forms of alternative transportation, like the pedal-bike that I use to commute to the train — biking to the train, bringing the bike onto the train, and having that flexible mobility when I get off. I've been doing that for the last 25 years traveling into Boston, even in winter except on severe weather days.

Twenty years ago I witnessed the construction of the infamous and costly Big Dig in Boston. The highway promoters at the time said that the Big Dig would solve Boston's traffic woes. It did not. Just listen to the daily traffic reports ... And all the while, then Gov. Mitt Romney canceled further study of the North-South rail link. A buffoonery on Mitt's part. ...

Mr. Rose puts forward a plan to widen Route 128/95 and Route 1, which sounds good to highway-only promoters. But who is already paying for the existing lanes of those highways, which in most cases are in bad shape and getting worse? Us bicycle/train intermodal commuters, who cannot use these limited-access highways that Mr. Rose is promoting, or who cannot drive or afford a new car.

Then there are the environmental issues associated with a highway, roads-only policy, and that is not just greenhouse gases and climate change. There is the tire soot ... road salting, defective vehicle parts that gets strewn on the roads. Who cleans that up? Along with how much granite rock has been blasted for the sake of highways. ...

I have a complete library of information supporting passenger rail at all levels, from light rail trolleys to 200 mph high-speed rail. One such book is the late U.S. Sen. Claiborne Pell's

“Megalopolis Unbounded,” circa 1966, depicting the Boston region’s traffic jams and it’s lack of revitalizing rail. ...

Above all we must get passenger rail funding at the federal level from a 50-50 match to that of highway construction, which is an 80 percent-20 percent match. Fair is fair with all modes of travel. Finally, bike paths can co-exist along electrified rail lines. Can bike paths exist along limited access highways?