

Taming the Northeast megalopolis

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In 1961, Jean Gottmann authored his book, “Megalopolis, The Urbanized Northeastern Seaboard of the United States.” He was describing the vast urbanized area stretching from the Boston suburbs extending into New Hampshire and south to D.C.’s outer reaches in northern Virginia. Today, this region encompasses 44 million people, representing about 16 percent of the total U.S. population.

In the more than half-century since Gottmann’s publication, many have thought about better ways to navigate this Boston-Washington corridor, as congested highways and airways pose ever increasing challenges.

At an early point in my career, I thought I might have a chance to wrestle with those transportation challenges in the Northeast Corridor. The project involved studying and computer-modeling the land use-transportation interactions in the state of Connecticut’s segment of the corridor. While working in California, I applied for and succeeded in gaining a position with a consulting engineering firm in Alexandria, Virginia.

After moving across the country, I was quickly assigned to a number of studies involving general aviation airports and their ground transportation connections ... nothing directly related to a study of the Northeast Corridor. When I finally inquired about the Connecticut project, I learned that there had been a change in the state administration during the time of my transcontinental move and the project was now off the table. I began my new job search that brought me to Baltimore.

Now, it seems everyone is looking at innovative ways to move swiftly from Boston to Washington and major points in between, notably New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore

Northeast Corridor Rail

First, we have the Northeast Corridor (NEC) FUTURE project, operating under the auspices of the Federal Railroad Administration. The FRA launched this comprehensive planning study in 2012 to consider the role that rail passenger transportation will play as travel demands change in the decades ahead.

As the result of years of study, the NEC Commission has established a vision for replacing aging rail infrastructure. That vision “prioritizes a corridor-wide commitment to the existing NEC, from Washington, D.C., to Boston, MA, by bringing it to a state of good repair and provides the additional capacity and service enhancements necessary to address passenger rail needs through 2040 and beyond.” These improvements would cost an estimated \$120-150 billion over 25 years.

Maglev

For the last couple of years, we have had people working on maglev. (This is maglev redux, an earlier initiative based with the Baltimore Development Corporation having been shelved.) Shortly into his new administration, Gov. Larry Hogan had the opportunity to visit Japan and to experience its magnetic levitation train, traveling at 311 miles per hour. Based on this train ride, the governor and his transportation secretary, Pete K. Rahm, decided that this was Maryland's future.

A \$28 million award from USDOT to a private company, Baltimore Washington Rapid Rail, has resulted in a study, now underway, of the feasibility of maglev in the corridor. The high-speed, superconducting magnetic levitation system would operate between Washington and Baltimore, with a stop at Baltimore Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport.

A series of five open houses have recently been held, providing opportunities for the attendees to review and comment on the overview of alternatives recommended for detailed study, the technology and engineering features and preliminary station information. Early estimates of the cost range between \$10-15 billion depending on the proportion of higher cost tunneling versus an elevated structure.

Hyperloop

Finally, we learned in recent days that Maryland has granted a permit for Elon Musk's Boring Co. to tunnel under the Interstate 295 right-of-way to accommodate his planned hyperloop. While there seems to be some confusion as to what permit or permits have been issued, or are needed, there are more than a few questions about the hyperloop technology.

Musk, the entrepreneur behind the Tesla electric car and SpaceX rockets, has a vision well beyond Maryland. In its full realization, his hyperloop project would extend the full 225 miles between New York and D.C., propelling his passengers in super high-speed pods and completing the trip in 29 minutes. Presumably, discussions of the billions it will cost will come later.

How interesting it is that Hogan and Rahm, who saw the proposed Red Line and its \$1.5 billion tunnel running from under the University of Maryland Medical Center through downtown to Canton, as a "boondoggle," are now seeming to be championing — simultaneously — the underground hyperloop and the superconducting maglev.

It would be easy, for even the casual observer, to see that not all of these investments can be realized. At this point, it's hard to foresee which solution to taming traffic congestion in the Northeast Corridor will win the day. But, as my personal history suggests, it may all come down to who occupies the key federal and state offices when the critical decisions are to be made.

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