South Coast Rail Explained

by Michael Silvia

New Bedford residents have a love/hate relationship with South Coast Rail, the rail line that will restore train service to Boston from Taunton, Fall River, Freetown, and New Bedford. We love the idea of being able to take a train from New Bedford to Boston for work or recreation. We hate that South Coast Rail has been promised so much in the past, that most New Bedford residents either sigh or laugh when they hear that "South Coast Rail is coming soon" in the news or from a politician's mouth. In 1991, Massachusetts Governor Weld made the infamous promise to a Chamber of Commerce audience at White's of Westport, "If you don't have commuter rail by 1997, you can sue me." Who's ready for a class-action lawsuit? Four governors later, and 16 years past the deadline, we are not much closer to having South Coast Rail service even though Governor Deval Patrick has recently promised $1.8 billion of funding. Even the most optimistic forecasts state that South Coast Rail service wouldn't start until 2018, or more than two decades past Weld's promise. Based on what I know today, 2020 would be a more realistic estimate.

South Coast Rail is an expensive, complex project. There's a lot of information (and misinformation) out there. With this article, I hope to explain the basics of South Coast Rail, examining the past, present and future of the project. For those that want to delve into the 100+ page documents produced by the state, check out my document sources at the bottom of this article.

Origins of South Coast Rail

South Cost Rail was first proposed in the 1980s with the intent of bringing economic development to the Fall River and New Bedford areas. New Bedford and Fall River peaked economically in the 1940s and declined significantly in the 1970s. New Bedford, once the whaling capital of the world, glass capital of the world (known as the “City of Light” at one point) and textile producing powerhouse, became a shell of itself with the fishing industry (mostly scallops) saving it from becoming a Flint, Michigan. South Coast Rail was to become the economic stimulus needed to boost New Bedford and Fall River’s economy.

South Coast Rail service will allow people to commute to Boston for higher paying jobs and bring significant tourism in the southcoast, Massachusetts. For New Bedford, it would stop the one-way migration of our most talented workers. Rather than commute, many simply relocated to Boston. New Bedford and Fall River generally have twice the unemployment rate of the state average. South Coast Rail would help bring New Bedford’s unemployment rate closer to parity with the state average.

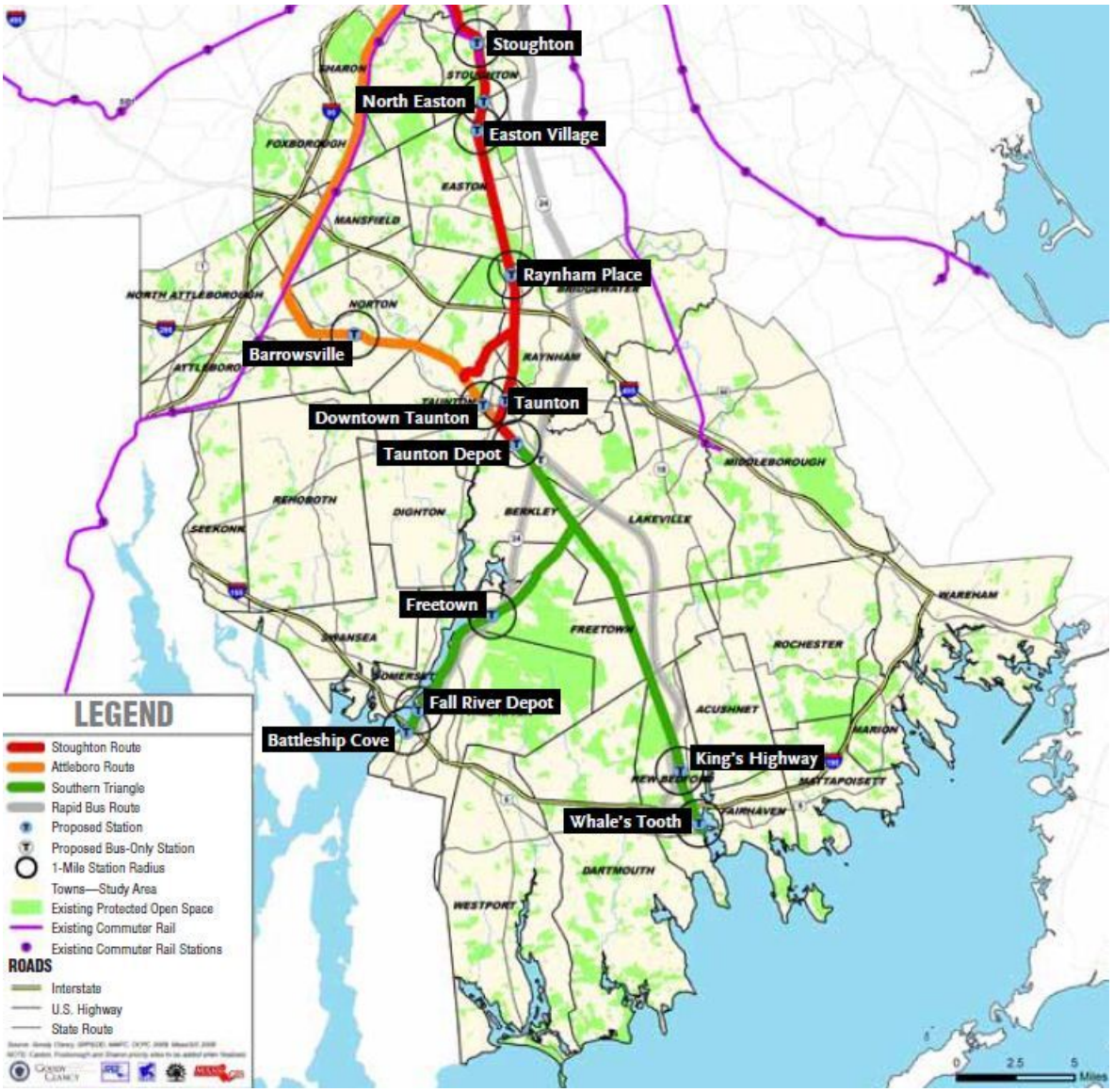
Proposed South Coast Stations

South Coast Rail is a network of 10 new train stations that will run southward from Stoughton to Taunton and then fork off to Fall River and New Bedford. New Bedford is proposed to get two train stations, a King’s Highway station and the Whale’s Tooth Station just off of Route 18 near downtown New Bedford.

- New Bedford Branch: King’s Highway and Whale’s Tooth Station (Route 18)

- Fall River Branch: Fall River Depot, Battleship Cove and Freetown
- Others: North Easton, Easton Village, Raynham Park, Taunton and East Taunton.

Heading North, these stations will connect to the Stoughton Station. Check out an interactive map here.



New Bedford Station Types

Not all train stations will be the same. For South Coast Rail there are four types; Multimodal Hub, New Center, Village Station and Park-and-Ride stations.

The Whale's Tooth Station on Route 18 in New Bedford will be a larger, Multimodal Hub Station. It will combined bus and rail

with structured parking. Other Multimodal Hub stations will include Fall River Depot and Downtown Taunton. Here’s a conceptual look at The Whale’s Tooth Station.

Whale s Tooth Station Concept Plan

STATION AREA DEVELOPMENT LINKS KEY DISTRICTS AND CITY NEIGHBORHOODS

New development around the station would enhance its attractiveness and strengthen pedestrian linkages to downtown New Bedford, city neighborhoods and major future mixed-use development in the Hicks-Logan-Sawyer redevelopment area north of Wamsutta Street. New development along Route 18 would enhance this important gateway to the city and provide a transition between city neighborhoods and the working waterfront. Development of a parking structure over the longer term could free additional land for development.

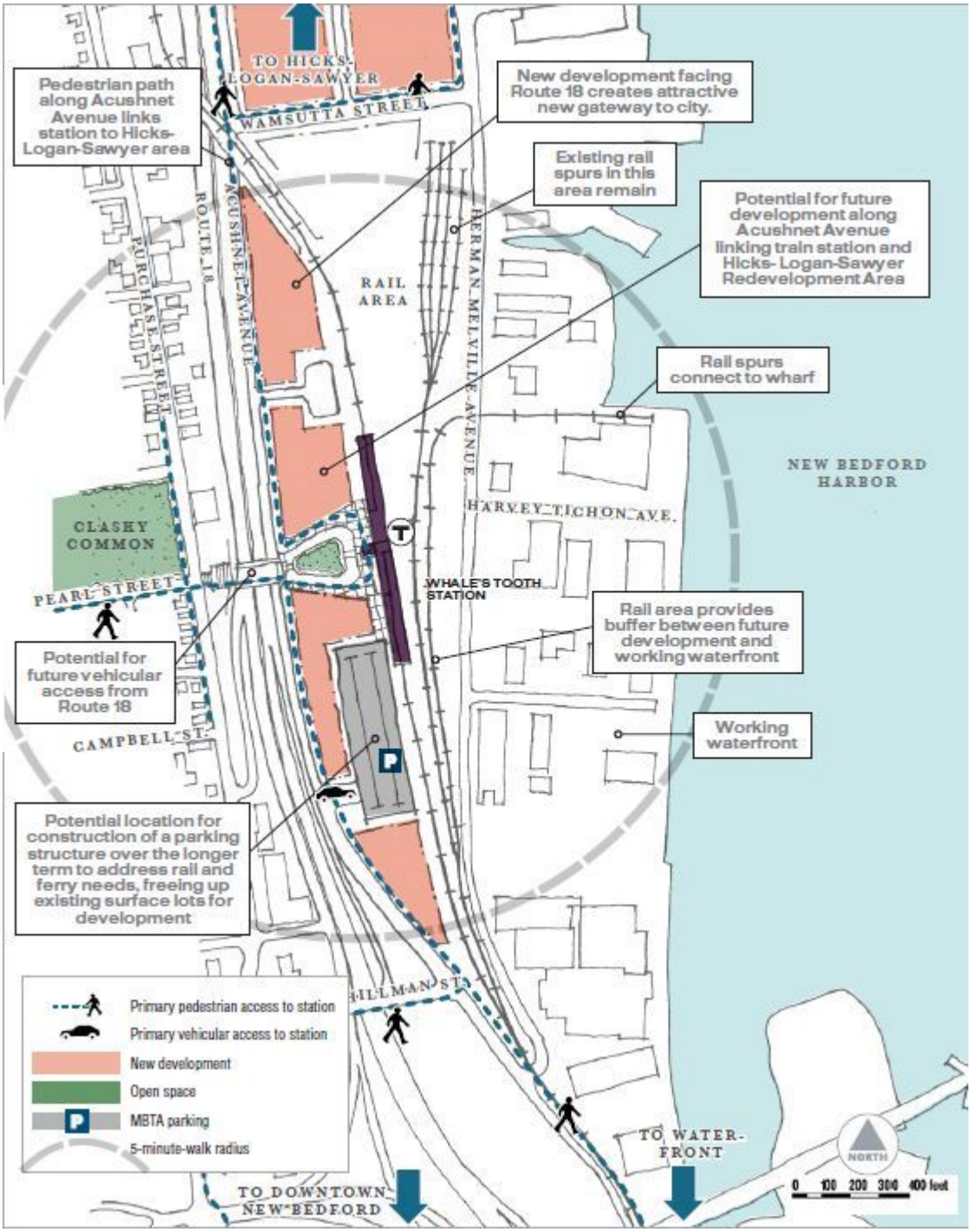
DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM
- 500,000SF commercial
- 1,400 housing units

(includes station area and Hicks-Logan-Sawyer)

Potential Future Character

The City's plans for Hicks-Logan-Sawyer will create a vibrant district that combines new and older structures.

Office or residential use could line a future parking structure, presenting an attractive face to Route 18.



The King's Highway Station will be a New Center station proving rail only with surface parking. Other New Center stations will include Freetown and Raynham Place. Here's a conceptual look at King's Highway Station:

King s Highway Station Concept Plan

MIXED-USE NEIGHBORHOOD CENTER

Redevelopment of the existing shopping center would provide an opportunity to create a mixed-use neighborhood center that combines retail, office, entertainment, and other uses close to new multifamily homes. New streets with sidewalks and a public square would establish a walkable and attractive place. A mix of new homes and commercial development east of the tracks would help create a transition to the existing residential neighborhood east of Church Street. Pedestrian paths to the station and commercial amenities would serve surrounding neighborhoods, both new and existing.

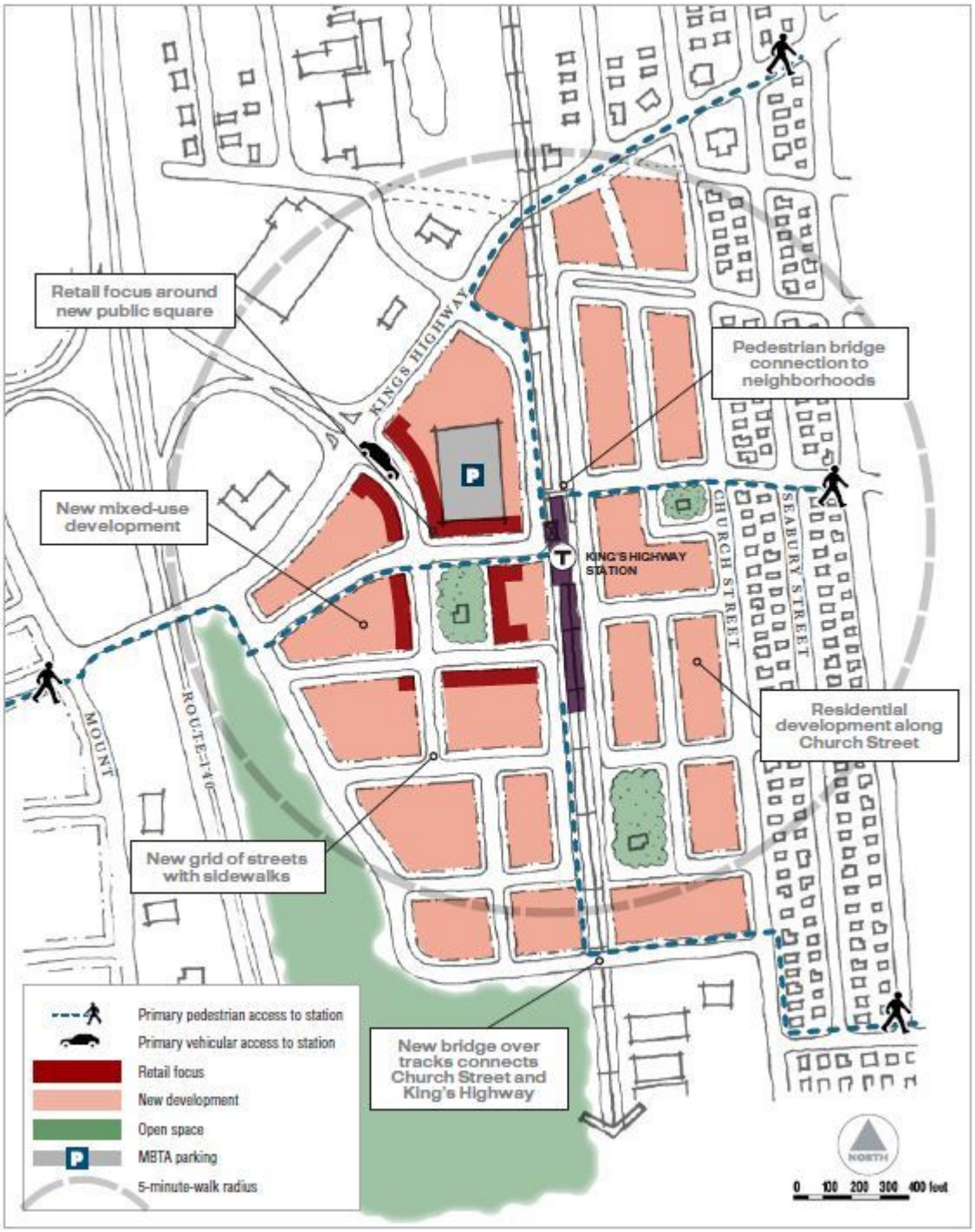
DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM
- 250,000SF retail/office
- 350 housing units

Potential Future Character

NEW MIXED-USE DEVELOPMENT

A mix of retail, office and residential uses could create the focus for a new neighborhood center.

A MIX OF NEW HOUSING
- Multifamily
- Townhouses



The other types of stations:

- Villiage Station – Rail only with limited parking. Village Stations include Taunton, Barrowsville, Easton Village and Stoughton.
- Park-and-Ride Station – Built to include sizeable surface lots to serve transit riders driving to the station from around the region. Park-and-ride stations include Taunton Depot and North Easton.

South Coast Rail Timeline

- 1980s – First Proposed
- June 2010, the state of Massachusetts finished purchasing track from freight company CSX.
- 17 February 2010, MBTA received $20 million in TIGER grants from the federal government to rebuild bridges in New Bedford for the future rail line, the first construction on the line.
- 22 March 2011, an environmental report on the South Coast Rail project by the US Army Corps of Engineers was released.
- 14 January, 2013, Gov. Deval Patrick proposes $1.8 billion in spending for South Coast Rail.

Documentation

- South Coast Rail Plan for Action – April 4th, 2007
- South Coast Rail Economic Development and Land Use Corridor Plan – June, 2009
- South Coast Rail Fact Sheet – October, 2010
- South Coast Rail Official Website
- Facebook Page Dedicated to South Coast Rail