

Appendix N
Saugus Branch Evaluation

SAUGUS BRANCH HYBRID ALTERNATIVE

A number of alternatives have been brought forward for consideration during the MIS and EIS processes. One, the Coastal Corridor would result in the replacement of all Commuter Rail service between Boston's North Station and Newburyport / Rockport with a rapid transit type service operating as a major extension of the Blue Line northwards from Revere. This concept is in conflict with the consensus of the communities north of Salem that wish to continue commuter rail service as it is today. In recognition of the need to more fully examine transit opportunities between Revere and Salem, while at the same time preserving the commuter rail services extending to Newburyport and Rockport, an alternative was identified which would permit continued operation of commuter rail service in concert with rapid transit service between Revere and Salem.

Definition

Under the Saugus Branch hybrid alternative, Newburyport / Rockport commuter rail service would operate from Boston's North Station on the Eastern Route Main Line to Everett Junction. At this locale, commuter rail service would be re-routed onto the MBTA-owned Saugus Branch, continuing along the 9 ½ mile length of the Branch through Everett, Malden and Saugus and rejoining the Eastern Route at Commercial, approximately one mile south of the Lynn Central Square Station. Commuter rail service would then continue unchanged north of Lynn out to Newburyport and Rockport. Use of the Saugus Branch for commuter rail operation would free up the Eastern Route Main Line for rapid transit service from the Saugus River Crossing south to Revere. North of the Saugus River through Lynn, the rapid transit service would share the existing four-track wide right-of-way with commuter rail services, with the two existing tracks being assigned to commuter rail and two new tracks being constructed for rapid transit.

The connection between rapid transit service and the Blue Line in Revere, in the vicinity of Wood Island and Airport Stations, would result in a new rapid transit segment between this proposed junction and the commuter rail right-of-way. This would raise the same alignment issues as discussed in the Coastal Corridor Concept white paper. The route is proposed to use the former Conrail / CSX East Boston [freight railroad] Branch. From the vicinity of Wood Island northwards to Chelsea Street, plans have already been developed to convert the right-of-way into a combined truck haul road (for Logan Airport) and an MBTA Urban Ring bus rapid transit route. The right-of-way is also constrained by abutters and highway grade crossings. Therefore, its additional use as a rail rapid transit route appears circumspect, at best.

Issues with this Alternative

Use of the Saugus Branch would require re-activation of a rail corridor that has been inactive since occasional freight service last operated in 1993 (along the western portion of the branch through Malden and Everett). Passenger service was last operated in 1958, whereupon the line was converted to a single-track operation. The Saugus Branch was constructed as a double track railroad throughout its length. However, removal of the second track and development along its length has resulted in apparent encroachments. A gas pipeline and other utility easements have been observed within the former track bed. Much of the Branch traverses densely developed areas in Everett,

Malden and Saugus. Reactivation of the Branch for commuter rail service, operating approximately 60 trains per day, poses serious potential concerns for noise and vibration and impacts on traffic and pedestrian activity. A formal examination of the line has not been performed, however it is estimated that upwards of two dozen rail-highway grade crossings would have to be evaluated. Crossings in some locales, such as in the immediate vicinity of Eastern Avenue in Malden, involve complex highway intersections with the potential for requiring extensive traffic mitigation activity.

Another issue is potential schedule impacts. The Branch is circuitous in nature and, as such, can not accommodate train operating speeds comparable to that of the parallel Eastern Route Main Line between Lynn and Everett Junction. It is estimated that use of the Branch could increase the commuter rail travel time between Lynn and Everett Junction by approximately 15 to 20 minutes. This additional travel time assumes that there will be no intermediate passenger stops on the Branch. Further detailed study would be required to determine the actual increase in schedule running times.

In conclusion, the Saugus Branch alternative provides an option for accommodating a rapid transit concept while preserving commuter rail service north of Salem. However, this alternative would appear to pose significant environmental, social, and physical impacts to the communities along the new alignment, and potential operational issues that would too negatively impact the level of commuter rail service currently provided. Further, during the DEIS public outreach, the cities of Everett and Malden also stated that this alternative does not support the current "Bike to the Sea" Project that is the transportation option favored by the region.