

Boston seeks to enhance long railway tradition

Ambitious plans are afoot in Boston to upgrade the rail network to meet increasing demand. **Anitra Green** talks to Richard Davey, secretary of transportation and CEO of Massachusetts Department of Transportation.

BOSTON has a strong rail tradition, being the first US city to open a subway in 1897, just beating New York. It is now run by Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA), the country's fifth largest public transport operator and is responsible for most of the bus, light rail, metro, commuter rail and ferry services in the Greater Boston area. Annual ridership is around 400 million, with 1.3 million trips per weekday - a respectable figure for a city of 650,000 inhabitants.

Mr Richard Davey, secretary of transportation and CEO of Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) since 2011, is well aware of the importance of maintaining and expanding the rail network as he was previously general manager of MBTA as well as MassDOT rail and transit administrator. Earlier this year MassDOT launched a five-year state-wide transit plan costing around \$US 12.4bn. About \$US 835m will be spent on new trains for the Red and Orange metro lines, due for delivery in 2019.

Another \$US 1.3bn will be spent on the 7km Green Line LRT extension from Lechmere northwest to Medford with a branch to Union Square in Somerville. Even though most of the alignment will parallel existing commuter rail lines, the project has taken years to get off the ground. "It's a legally-registered project which should have opened in 2002, but it still hasn't been started, even though it's popular with the community - except where the line passes through," commented Davey. Despite the delay, new rolling stock has been ordered for the



Green Line under a \$US 118m contract with CAF for 24 LRVs for delivery in 2017-18.

A five-year plan for improving rail infrastructure is also underway. "The balance is 80% repair and 20% expansion, but in the first year it's more likely to be 90% repair," Davey explains. "It would be a good idea to upgrade signalling too, but there's no funding. Politics is very polarised, and politicians underestimate the cost of maintaining assets as it's not glamorous. If you keep kicking the can down the road, you can't keep up with life-cycle costs. Fix it and put it out doesn't work - you have to replace it with new equipment."

Expansion of the busy South Station from 13 tracks to 20 is another major project. "The idea is to buy the neighbouring US postal building and demolish it to

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Richard Davey

make room for the extra tracks," Davey explained, who has already established a reputation for being an energetic and effective upcoming leader.

Davey is willing to consider using public-private partnerships to fund projects, despite the general lack of enthusiasm for them in the

United States. "We're excited about them in Massachusetts, but the US is a lot slower with this than other countries. We're looking to use them for several projects including the South Station extension."

High speed

The expansion of South Station, which is currently the terminal of Amtrak's Northeast Corridor to New York and Washington DC as well as MBTA commuter rail services, forms part of the vision for the New England High-Speed and Intercity Rail Network.

"High-speed is a great idea; nearly everyone thinks so except road buffs," Davey enthuses. "The maglev in Japan with a speed of over 500km/h is very impressive; this would mean a transit time of just 45 minutes between Washington and New York. It

would work, but politically it's not popular, as most of the populace wouldn't get the benefit, and Amtrak isn't very popular either. But no-one's working on the problem. It's a pity, because the potential for services like this between large urban centres is limitless. We don't think bold anymore," he says.

But some bold thinking is underway in Massachusetts. For example, introducing business class on commuter rail services is being considered as a way of appealing to those people wedded to their cars who regard public transport as a service designed for people who can't afford anything better.

Another innovation is the introduction of late night services for which a premium fare is charged. "We've just started late night services up to 03.00 on Fridays and Saturdays, which is very popular," Davey says. "It is more expensive than normal services, but still cheaper than a cab."

Davey says Boston is the first transit system in the United States to introduce display screens at stations giving information on the next arrivals, and free Wi-Fi hotspots went live on Green Line stations on July 1. "The more amenities we can provide, the more popular rail travel becomes," Davey says. **IRJ**