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transportation

T will assess whether projects fit agency needs

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By **Nicole Dungca** and **Matt Rocheleau**

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Boston 2024 organizers announced on Monday grand plans to revitalize Widett Circle, including a brand new

commuter rail station that would serve the Fairmount Line.

But the Olympic bid committee had apparently not yet briefed the T's interim general manager, Frank DePaola, on the project.

As Boston 2024 officials push a bid to host the Olympic Games, they have promised transportation improvements that would benefit the entire region. Yet for several of the projects, it's not clear that the state Transportation Department and the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority are on board quite yet.

DePaola on Tuesday said he had not known about a privately funded, \$96 million commuter rail station that would abut a new Olympic Stadium before Boston 2024 on Monday unveiled its updated bid, dubbed "bid 2.0."

Both DePaola and Transportation Secretary Stephanie Pollack spoke in measured tones about the projects on Tuesday, saying the T and the administration will support improvements that are the most beneficial to the state and transportation network. DePaola said the T will look at Boston 2024's priorities alongside the transit system's own.

Vennochi: 2024 bid is Baker's call

"There are areas where we could coincide," DePaola said in an interview after a monthly meeting of the state transportation board. "There are areas where they may be proposing things that we would have to revisit whether or not it's the right investment for us."

Richard A. Davey, the president of Boston 2024, characterized Monday's announcement of bid 2.0 as the "start of a conversation."

"Today we highlighted these needed transportation improvements and now it is our job to make the case to city and state leaders and transportation officials that these projects can have a long-term legacy impact for the

region,” he said in a written statement.

The new version of the bid highlights roughly \$3 billion in construction projects that would upgrade local roadways and public transportation, including purchasing new trains and buses, and building new stations.

The plan says that about two-thirds of the work is already scheduled, and public funding is promised, regardless of whether the Olympics come to Boston.

Of the five largest transportation-related projects Olympic planners cite, four are listed as already “designed/planned and funded” by the state: \$801 million to buy new Red and Orange line trains; \$499 million to buy new commuter rail vehicles; \$356 million to buy new buses; and \$321 million to upgrade subway power and signal equipment.

With heightened scrutiny on how much the Games will cost taxpayers, the bid committee made it clear in the latest version of the bid about which projects aren’t yet funded.

For one, Boston 2024 highlighted projects that would need funding by public dollars even if the Games don’t come here: \$455 million for subway signal and power upgrades; \$100 million to upgrade the Broadway Station; \$60 million to upgrade JFK/UMass Station; and \$160 million to improve Kosciuszko Circle.

Another \$267 million would need to be funded privately by a developer, according to the organization. That includes some major T projects, including moving a massive maintenance facility in South Boston. DePaola and Pollack said they had both been briefed on that move.

Of those privately funded projects, the \$96 million commuter rail station at Widett Circle would be the biggest investment. Davey pointed out that using private money for the station would not be new to the MBTA: The agency recently broke ground on a \$20 million commuter rail station in Brighton funded by New Balance; it is near the athletic apparel company’s headquarters.

Still, some public transit advocates worry that the transportation projects won’t necessarily benefit the state as much as Boston 2024 leaders say they will. Rafael Mares, a senior attorney with the Conservation Law Foundation, said he wouldn’t mind a commuter rail station at Widett Circle, but only if the Olympic bid is able to spur development in the area substantially.

Mares said he worries the latest bid won’t be able to leave a more substantive transportation legacy, and will force some transit projects to happen before other crucial ones.

“The risk is that they would distort existing priorities by putting something ahead of the list,” he said.

But officials from the administration and the T say they are not yet ready to judge whether the transportation projects are worth it.

Pollack said she won't have any conclusions about any of the projects on the first day of the new plan's release.

The governor and legislative leaders have hired an outside consultant to look at the bid's impact on the state, and Pollack said the administration will have to wait for that analysis.

"What the governor and I have been asking for is a new plan that's very explicit about which transportation projects are needed and beneficial, so now we can analyze it," she said.

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