

[**Green Line plan sped past warnings**](http://www.bostonherald.com/opinion/op_ed/2016/05/chieppo_green_line_plan_sped_past_warnings)

Pols know problems arrive on someone else’s watch

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The MBTA’s Green Line extension appears headed toward a happy ending after it was approved by the MassDOT board and the MBTA’s Fiscal and Management Control Board this week. But let’s hope future policymakers can learn a lesson from the same political parable that twice played out more than two decades apart in the project’s long journey.

The extension was among the projects agreed to by the Dukakis administration when, literally days before leaving office in 1991, they caved to demands in a lawsuit filed by the Conservation Law Foundation. The administration signed a consent decree committing the MBTA to build billions of dollars of new transit projects as “environmental mitigation” for the Big Dig, even though it was unclear whether the Big Dig would negatively impact air quality.

There was no source of funding for the commitment. It would have been a textbook case of “let the next sucker worry about it,” except for the fact that there were so many subsequent suckers.

Until 2014, the budget for the 4.7-mile above-ground extension through Cambridge, Somerville and Medford was $1.4 billion, but that increased to $2 billion in 2014. Signs of budget trouble first surfaced in 2013, but were ignored. MBTA managers continued to forge ahead, approving four contracts even though they were a combined 44 percent over budget.

Three new stations were expected to cost $387 million, a number that subsequently jumped to $487 million. But when the bid for the stations came in at $889 million, the MBTA and state transportation officials could no longer hide the fact that they had lost control of project costs.

It turns out that state transportation officials were so focused on submitting a federal grant proposal in hopes that it would be approved before Gov. Deval Patrick’s term ended in January 2015 that little else mattered. Patrick got to hold the press conference announcing the $1 billion grant weeks before leaving office, as project costs were soaring.

The MBTA’s Fiscal and Management Control Board has gotten the extension under control and hopefully avoided the very real possibility that it would be scrapped, which would still leave the MBTA on the hook for $700 million already spent. The approved project is expected to cost $2.3 billion, pared down from $3 billion.

Challenges remain. The Federal Transit Administration will have to reaffirm its $1 billion grant and there is still a $73 million funding shortfall. Most of all, the Green Line extension will be the first test of whether a retooled MBTA can turn the page on its past and bring in a major project on time and on budget.

The Green Line extension itself isn’t a bad thing, but the process by which it came to be reminds us of a practice so ingrained that it appears to be embedded in the political DNA: plowing ahead with a project under the assumption that problems will manifest themselves on someone else’s watch. The political cast changes, but the same taxpayers are left to pick up the tab.

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