



## Editorial: A brilliant plan to re-use the Brilliant Branch — for rail transit



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APR 25, 2024

2:30 AM

Since the reopening of the Overbrook T Line in 2004, there have been no major additions to Pittsburgh's transit infrastructure — only decline due to stagnant population, dwindling funding and finally the COVID pandemic. While the region looks forward to the new University Line, which will provide efficient service between Downtown and Oakland, that won't open up new transit corridors but improve current ones.

Quietly, however, a proposal has been percolating to add something truly new to Pittsburgh's transit options. It would be inexpensive to taxpayers — in fact, it would be privately managed — and could be brought online in a matter of months. And it would be rail, the gold standard for efficiency and ease-of-use.

This is the brilliant plan to re-use the Brilliant Branch railroad. And approving it would be an easy public policy victory for County Executive Sara Innamorato.

### Brilliant tradition

The Brilliant Branch runs about three miles from Norfolk Southern's Pittsburgh Line in Homewood to the NS Conemaugh Line across the Allegheny River in Aspinwall. The branch is owned by the Allegheny Valley Railroad, and also connects to the AVR Allegheny Line on the south shore of the river.

The railroad runs parallel to Washington Blvd, and includes the majestic Brilliant Cutoff Viaduct, a 120-year-old stone-arch structure that dominates the valley below. Historically, the Brilliant Branch formed an essential connection between two of the most important rail corridors in the region. But for the past five years, the cutoff has been used only on an emergency basis.

This led to a movement, which the Post-Gazette Editorial Board strongly endorsed in late 2022, to convert the Brilliant Branch into a pedestrian and biking trail that would showcase the natural and man-made beauty of the surroundings — while providing an essential link between the Allegheny Valley and the East End. Allegheny County has been poised to purchase the

railroad from AVR for \$4.7 million, then convey it to the Allegheny RiverTrail Park.

All that was needed was approval from the federal Surface Transportation Board (STB), which ensures that railroad rights-of-way serve the needs of the entire country. This was thought to be a formality. But a second option had always been available, snarled in the thickets of county politics. With a competing STB filing last week, that option has finally come to light.

## Brilliant idea

Pop-Up Metro, a subsidiary of the Downtown-based Railroad Development Corporation (RDC), believes that the rails on the Brilliant Branch don't have to be trashed to turn the property into a trail. In fact, they can be put to use as a transit corridor.

The vision belongs to RDC chairman Henry Posner III, member of a venerable family of Pittsburghers and railroaders. As a child, Mr. Posner climbed the switch tower at the rail intersection in Homewood, and befriended the man who worked there. As an adult, he has spearheaded rail projects all over the world, including France, Germany, Peru and Iowa.

Pop-Up Metro would install battery-powered transit vehicles, made from former London Underground equipment, and run a shuttle between Homewood and Aspinwall. There would be modular, easy-to-build and ADA-compliant platforms in Homewood, near the Pittsburgh Job Corps Center, in Aspinwall and near the Waterworks Mall. The plan envisions a future expansion along the south shore of the Allegheny to Verona and Oakmont.

In the Allegheny Valley communities, the Pop-Up Metro proposal would restore their legacy of rail transit and connect them more securely to the city's transit system via the East Busway. It would also provide added connectivity for the underserved communities of Homewood and Lincoln-Lemington. And while RDC has proved the concept of its battery-powered vehicles at multiple sites, this would be their first full implementation anywhere, making the Brilliant Branch a tourist attraction in itself.

## Brilliant legacy

And it could all happen while still transforming the wide Brilliant Branch right-of-way into a walking and biking trail, just as in the current proposal. Rails *with* trails (as opposed to rails *to* trails) are a safe way to preserve rail functionality — including keeping the line available for freight in case of emergencies — while maximizing the utility of the old rights-of-way. In fact, the Pop-Up Metro bid has received support from Charles N. Marshall, former chairman of the Rails to Trails Conservancy, and Bill Metzger, founding board member of the Great Allegheny Passage Conservancy.

As for the cost, RDC proposes to save Allegheny County taxpayers over \$3 million by splitting the cost of the right-of-way and buying the tracks outright. It would then work with the Allegheny RiverTrail Park to develop the trail aspect of the project — which would be much cheaper without having to pull up the tracks.










There are still details to be worked out, most notably the nature of the connection with the East Busway. While Mr. Posner believes that the transit link — including at least some platforms — could be ready to go within a matter of months, creating a seamless connection to the Pittsburgh Regional Transit system will require extensive negotiations, and likely some expensive additional infrastructure.

Even so, the Pop-Up Metro bid has merit even without the direct Busway connection. Above all, it would preserve a functional rail line while developing a beautiful new trail — and saving taxpayer dollars.

Ultimately, the decision is up to the federal Surface Transportation Board. But Ms. Innamorato can make the choice easy by withdrawing Allegheny County's trail-only proposal, leaving Pop-Up Metro as the only bid. It would be an easy way for the new executive to make a distinctive — even legacy-building — contribution early in her term.

And it would be a perfectly Pittsburgh innovation, building something new on something old, which could serve as a model for future projects here and around the country.

*First Published April 25, 2024, 2:30am*

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