



Airport Transit Connection Concept Evaluation Study Addendum — Executive Summary

September 2026

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Acronyms/Abbreviations

Acronym/Abbreviations	Definition
APM	automated people mover
CONRAC	Consolidated Rental Car Center
MTS	Metropolitan Transit System
OMSF	operations, maintenance, and storage facility
PDT	Project Development Team
SANDAG	San Diego Association of Governments
SDIA	San Diego International Airport

1 Project Introduction

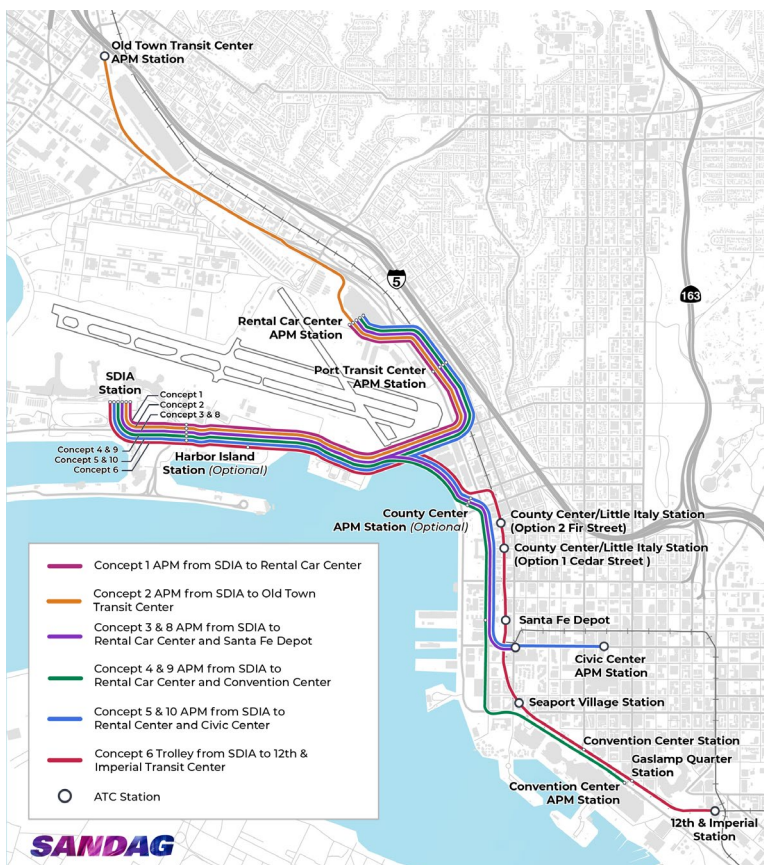
1.1 Background and Purpose of Addendum

The San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) has been evaluating options for a direct, high-quality regional transit connection to San Diego International Airport (SDIA). Efforts began in 2018, when the SANDAG Board of Directors established the Airport Connectivity Subcommittee. In July 2023, SANDAG released the Airport Transit Connection Concept Evaluation Study, which developed and evaluated concepts spanning three transit modes: an automated people mover (APM), San Diego Trolley (Trolley) light rail, and enhanced bus service. The purpose of this addendum is to further evaluate and identify the leading rail concepts that could advance to a future environmental clearance phase. The addendum builds on the 2023 study, incorporating new technical work, concept refinements, an evaluation of concepts, and stakeholder coordination.

1.2 Concepts Studied

This addendum evaluated 21 concepts derived from six core routes to and from SDIA (Figure 1). These concepts span two rail transit modes—APM and Trolley (Figure 2)—and connect SDIA to a range of potential destinations, including the Old Town Transit Center, Consolidated Rental Car Center (CONRAC), Santa Fe Depot, Civic Center, Convention Center, and 12th & Imperial Transit Center, as shown on Figure 1 and summarized in Table 1.

Figure 1. Concepts Studied



Source: SANDAG 2026

Figure 2. Rail Modes Studied



Source: LAWA

Total alignment lengths across the concepts range from approximately 2.4 to 4.8 miles, with up to seven new stations, depending on the concept (Table 1). Concepts could be constructed with different types of configurations including elevated track, street level track, open trench, underground tunnel, or a hybrid of these types (that is, elevated in some segments and underground tunnel in others). Figure 3 shows examples of these different configurations in San Diego.

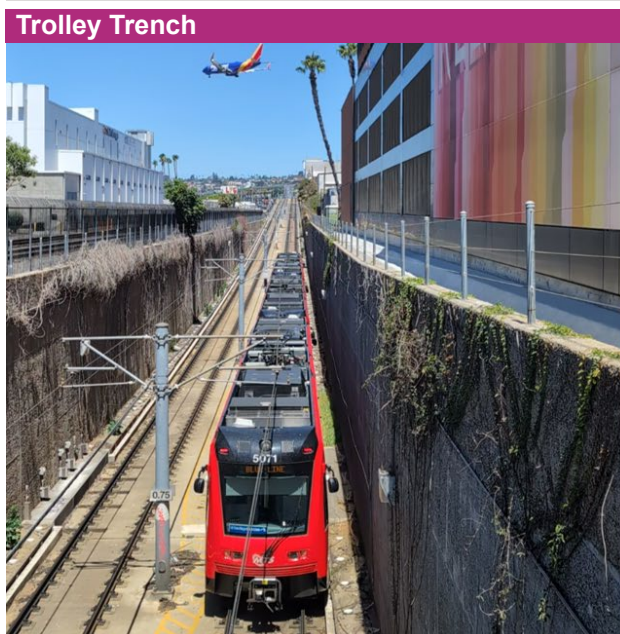
Figure 3. Rail Configurations in San Diego



Underground Trolley Station



Street Level Trolley



Trolley Trench



Elevated Trolley Station

Source: MTS, SANDAG, and WSP

Table 1. Summary of Concepts Studied

Concept	Mode/Routes	Description	Total length (miles)	Number of stations
1A-C ¹	APM north route ²	SDIA to CONRAC/Port Transit Center – Hybrid	2.40	Up to four ³
2	APM north route	SDIA to Old Town Transit Center – Hybrid	4.13	Up to four ³
3A	APM north and south route	SDIA to PTC/CONRAC and Santa Fe Depot – Elevated South Route	3.83	Up to six ⁴
3B	APM north and south route	SDIA to PTC/CONRAC and Santa Fe Depot – Bored Tunnel South Route	3.59	Up to six ⁴
3C	APM north and south route	SDIA to PTC/CONRAC and Santa Fe Depot – Hybrid South Route	3.81	Up to six ⁴
4A	APM north and south route	SDIA to PTC/CONRAC and Convention Center – Elevated South Route	4.77	Up to seven ⁴
4B	APM north and south route	SDIA to PTC/CONRAC and Convention Center – Bored Tunnel South Route	4.55	Up to seven ⁴
4C	APM north and south route	SDIA to PTC/CONRAC and Convention Center – Hybrid South Route	4.75	Up to seven ⁴
5A	APM north and south route	SDIA to PTC/CONRAC and Civic Center – Elevated South Route	4.23	Up to seven ⁴
5B	APM north and south route	SDIA to PTC/CONRAC and Civic Center – Bored Tunnel South Route	3.99	Up to seven ⁴
5C	APM north and south route	SDIA to PTC/CONRAC and Civic Center – Hybrid South Route	4.22	Up to seven ⁴
6A	Trolley	SDIA to 12th & Imperial Transit Center – existing tracks, spur tracks to SDIA	3.89	Up to eight (six existing) ³
6B	Trolley	SDIA to 12th & Imperial Transit Center – extend existing trench south to B St/Santa Fe Depot; spur tracks to SDIA	3.89	Up to eight (six existing) ³
8A	APM south route	SDIA to Santa Fe Depot – Elevated	2.51	Up to four ⁴
8B	APM south route	SDIA to Santa Fe Depot – Hybrid	2.50	Up to four ⁴
9A	APM south route	SDIA to Convention Center – Elevated	3.45	Up to five ⁴
9B	APM south route	SDIA to Convention Center – Hybrid	3.43	Up to five ⁴
10A	APM south route	SDIA to Civic Center – Elevated	2.91	Up to five ⁴
10B	APM south route	SDIA to Civic Center – Hybrid	2.90	Up to five ⁴

Source: WSP and HDR 2026

Notes: APM = automated people mover; CONRAC = Consolidated Rental Car Center; PTC = Port Transit Center; SDIA = San Diego International Airport

¹ The characteristics presented are common for Concept 1A, 1B, and 1C. Concept 1B includes a direct access ramp to/from I-5. Concept 1C includes a single LOSSAN (COASTER and/or Surfliner) platform. Concept 1A includes neither.

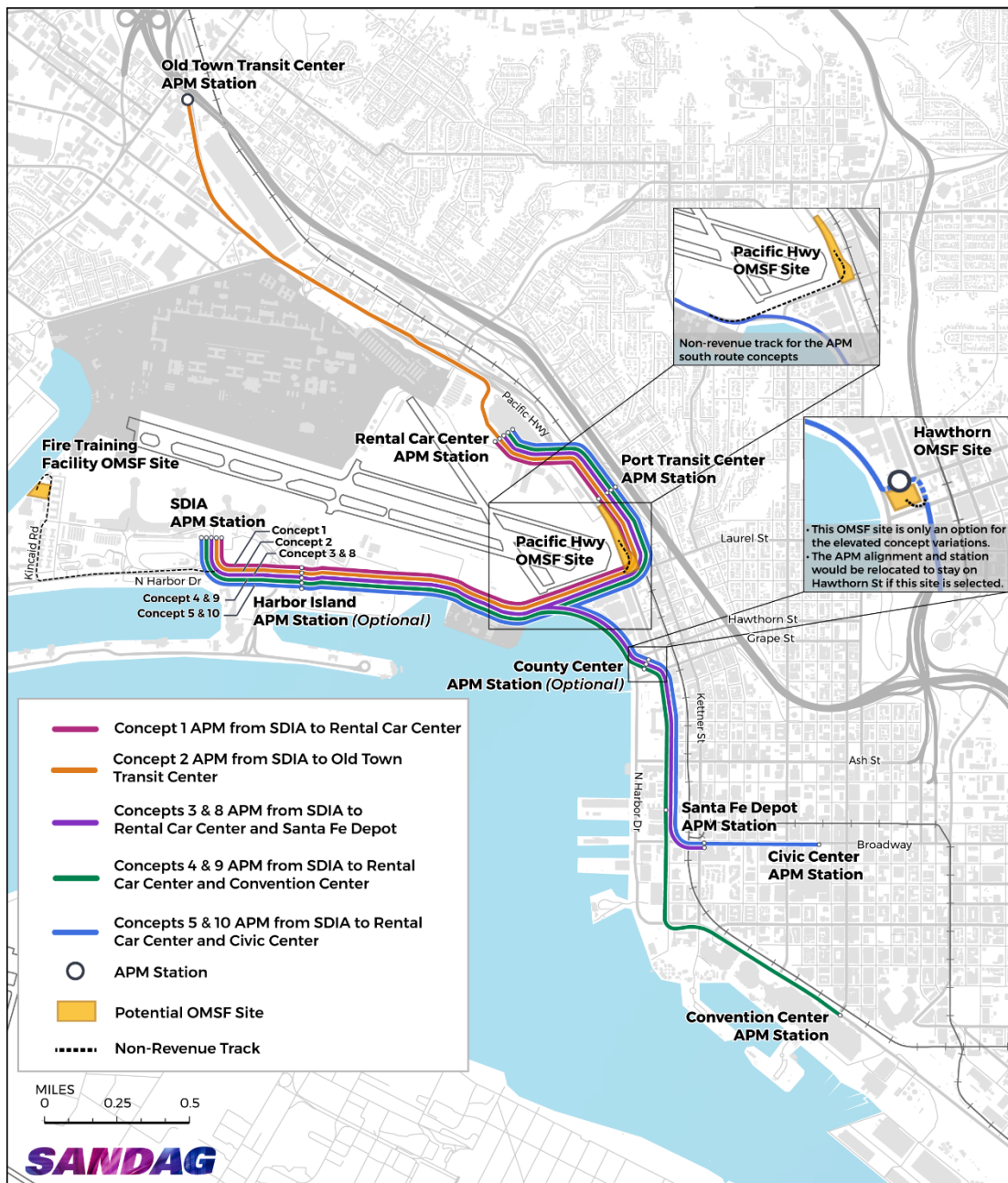
² A north route for APM concepts refers to alignments or alignment segments from SDIA to CONRAC or the Old Town Transit Center, north of Laurel Street. A south route for APM concepts refers to alignments or alignment segments that travel south of SDIA to downtown.

³ Harbor Island is an optional station.

⁴ Harbor Island and County Administration Building are optional stations.

Both rail modes studied—Trolley and APM—would introduce different operational considerations that would shape what a new airport connection could look like. The APM concepts (Concepts 1A-C, 2, 3A-C, 4A-C, 5A-C, 8A-B, 9A-B, and 10A-B) would introduce new technology to the region and require the identification of a site and construction of a new operations, maintenance, and storage facility (OMSF) to store and service rail vehicles. In coordination with partner agencies and based on existing conditions and information, SANDAG identified three potential OMSF sites with no major feasibility concerns. The two Trolley concepts (Concepts 6A-B) would utilize existing technology operating within the San Diego Metropolitan Transit System (MTS) network as well as the existing OMSF near the 12th & Imperial Transit Center. (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Potential OMSF Sites



Source: SANDAG 2026

2 Partner Agency Collaboration and Public Outreach

Throughout the process, SANDAG coordinated closely with public agency partners and community stakeholders to share the latest technical work and gather input on the pare down process. This included regular Project Development Team (PDT) meetings as well as a series of community stakeholder roundtables. PDT members represented the following partner agencies:

- California Department of Transportation
- City of San Diego
- MTS
- North County Transit District, operating as North County Transit – San Diego Railroad
- Port of San Diego
- SDIA

Coordination with the MTS following the Concept Evaluation Study shaped the development of a new Trolley concept included in this addendum (Concept 6B) and informed the decision to conduct Trolley operational modeling to determine the potential for 7.5-minute headways (the time between vehicle arrivals), where the Airport Trolley Line would share tracks with other existing Trolley services. The modeling demonstrated the feasibility of 7.5-minute headways on the proposed Airport Trolley Line, and these headways were used in the updated cost estimates and ridership forecasting evaluated in this addendum. Meetings with SDIA, the City of San Diego, and the Port of San Diego focused on identifying potential sites for an APM OMSF, including a review of more than 40 candidate properties suggested by the City. Partner agency workshops were also held in support of the pare down process, and attendees did not raise objections to the recommendations put forth.

Separate from the agency-focused PDT meetings, SANDAG also held two roundtable meetings for stakeholders, in March 2025 and September 2025, to directly engage community planning groups, business organizations, transportation advocates, and community-based organizations. These sessions gave community representatives a chance to weigh in on the concepts under consideration and to help shape the pare down process around local priorities and mobility challenges. The following community organizations and advocacy groups participated in the roundtables:

- Ride SD
- Downtown Community Planning Council
- Train Coalition
- Downtown San Diego Partnership
- Circulate San Diego
- Vista Community Clinic
- Bayside Community Center
- Olivewood Garden

3 Pare Down Process

Since 2023, SANDAG completed new technical work to support development and evaluation of the rail concepts, including Trolley operational modeling, an updated Airport Travel Survey, a review of potential APM OMSF sites, and updated preliminary capital cost estimates. Additionally, updated ridership for the concepts was forecast in Round 3. This technical work informed a three-round pare down process developed to identify the concepts that could move forward to a future environmental clearance phase.

3.1 Pare Down Round 1

Round 1 screened the six core route concepts using a set of quantitative pare down metrics that were developed to evaluate the concepts based on data available in 2025. These metrics were grouped into two categories:

- Travel markets, informed in part by the SANDAG Airport Travel Survey completed in 2024, along with resident, employee, and underserved population data around each station
- Transit connectivity to the existing transit network

The Round 1 criteria focused on potential travelers and connectivity at the concept stations. The evaluation was based on the six core routes because the specific configuration (underground or elevated) of the 21 individual concepts would not change the overall connectivity provided by the concept. Based on this screening, SANDAG recommended eliminating Concepts 1A-C and 2—the two APM concepts that only serve locations north of the airport—as they were the lowest scoring concepts. The partner agencies raised no objection and the remaining concepts, including their alignment variations, advanced to Round 2.

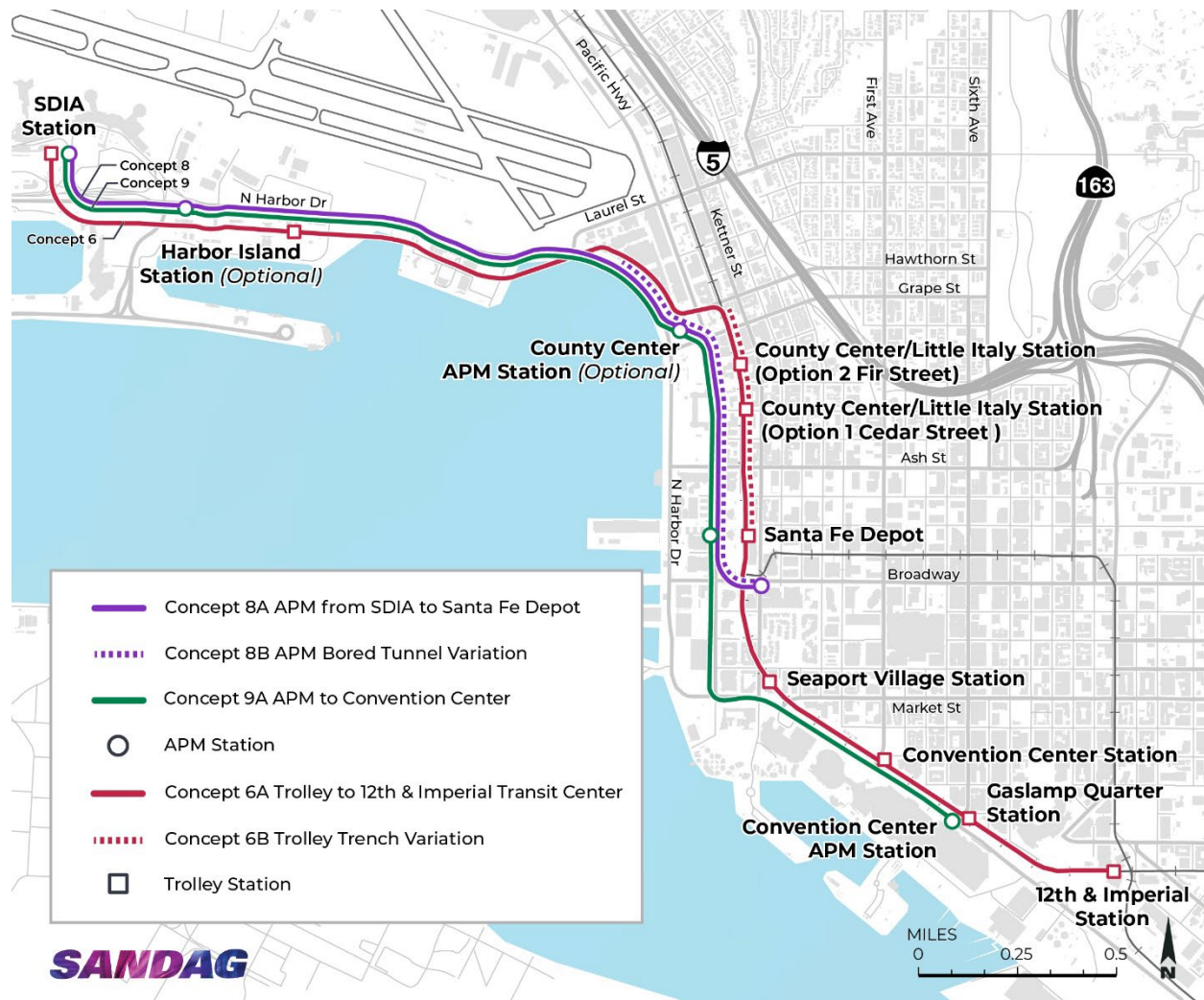
3.2 Pare Down Round 2

Round 2 used both quantitative and qualitative criteria to evaluate additional considerations for the remaining concepts and their alignment variations. Four categories of criteria were developed: cost considerations, complexity, compatibility with other regional plans and projects, and operational considerations. Based on this evaluation, SANDAG recommended advancing Concepts 6A, 6B, 8A, 8B, and 9A to Round 3 (Figure 5). Concepts 6A and 6B are Trolley concepts serving the 12th & Imperial Transit Center; Concepts 8A and 8B are APM concepts ending at Santa Fe Depot; and Concept 9A is an APM concept ending at the Convention Center. The combined north-and-south-route APM concepts (3A-C, 4A-C, 5A-C) were eliminated from further consideration along with Concepts 9B and 10A-B. Again, the partner agencies raised no objection.

3.3 Pare Down Round 3

Round 3 developed more detailed information for the five concepts advanced from Round 2. This analysis included station-to-station and total end-to-end travel time estimates, along with updated 2050 ridership forecasts. The evaluation was based on the core routes for Concept 6, Concept 8, and Concept 9 because the alignment configuration (e.g., underground or elevated) has little effect on travel time for ridership forecasting purposes. No further concepts were eliminated as part of Round 3.

Figure 5. Remaining Airport Transit Connection Rail Concepts



4 Conclusion and Recommendations

Taken together, the three rounds of the pare down process narrowed the initial slate of 21 concept variations to five concepts that could advance into a future environmental clearance phase: Trolley Concepts 6A and 6B and APM Concepts 8A, 8B, and 9A. These five concepts represent the two rail transit modes and three potential Downtown San Diego destinations: the 12th & Imperial Transit Center, Santa Fe Depot, and the Convention Center.

Each concept provides meaningful transit benefits, including serving different locations in Downtown San Diego, while balancing capital cost, operations and maintenance needs, and construction complexity. Each concept remains compatible with future extensions. While underground or trenched concepts, such as those included in Concepts 8B and 6B, would increase cost, they could provide benefits to the surrounding community. Table 2 summarizes key takeaways by concept.

SANDAG also notes that Concept 9A could be implemented in phases, with the segment connecting the airport to Santa Fe Depot built first and later extended to the Convention Center, as funding allows. Because the timing of a future environmental clearance phase is not yet known, SANDAG anticipates that some elements of this analysis—particularly the availability of the candidate OMSF sites—may need to be revisited before that phase begins.

In the interim, and consistent with the Regional Plan, SANDAG intends to advance planning for Rapid bus services to the airport while funding strategies for a future rail connection are identified.

Table 2. Key Takeaways by Concept

Concept Considerations	APM to Santa Fe Depot		APM to Convention Center	Trolley to 12th & Imperial Transit Center	
	Concept 8A	Concept 8B	Concept 9A	Concept 6A	Concept 6B
Infrastructure	APM All Elevated	APM Elevated & Underground	APM All Elevated	Trolley Connection	Trolley with Extended Trench
Total Route Ridership¹	~4,500	~4,500	~5,800	~8,800	~8,800
Ridership at Airport Station^{1,2}	~4,000	~4,000	~5,100	~5,700	~5,700
Estimated Capital Cost³	~\$2.2B	~\$3.3B	~\$2.6B	~\$1.5B	~\$3.1B
Total Travel Time⁴	7.6 mins	7.6 mins	10.5 mins	17.7 mins	17.7 mins

Source: SANDAG 2026

Notes: ¹Expressed as daily boardings. Ridership figures are rounded to the nearest hundred.

²Ons + offs at airport station

³Capital cost estimates are preliminary, expressed in 2025 dollars, and exclude right-of-way, financing, and cost escalation. Costs are midpoints of an approximate range.

⁴Assuming 55-second station dwell times