

Residents, officials trade ideas on city's east-west Red Line proposal

Transit line potential discussed

BY JUNE ARNEY
(SUN REPORTER)

Hundreds of people came out yesterday to learn about and help shape plans for an east-west transit route in Baltimore — a project that would cost more than \$1 billion and could go from dream to groundbreaking as soon as 2012.

Mayor Sheila Dixon's Red Line Summit drew more than 300 people to the Baltimore Convention Center to hear experts from around the country and to brainstorm about how more than 40 city neighborhoods could benefit from the transit project.

"The Red Line is critical to the future of our city for so many reasons," Dixon said. "It's not every day that a billion-dollar project comes to East and West Baltimore. The opportunity is there, and we have to seize it."

The proposed 12-mile transit line would operate from the Social Security Administration in Baltimore County to the Johns Hopkins Bayview campus in Southeast Baltimore.

Construction could begin as early as 2012, pending review and approval by [Please see RED LINE, 4B]

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the Federal Transit Administration and a funding plan endorsed by state and federal government. The Maryland Transit Administration has officially narrowed down its choices to a light rail system or a bus system operating in dedicated lanes, known as bus rapid transit, although it has also agreed to less formally consider proposals for heavy rail.

Vital to making sure that the project unfolds in the best interests of the city is making sure that a community compact is drafted that identifies the matters local residents consider most important, Dixon said.

In workshop groups, those who attended yesterday brainstormed about the top issues, including everything from monitoring noise and air quality and rats around the construction site, to making sure that WiFi and bike racks are present in the stations, to protecting historic neighborhoods.

Karen Shannon, owner of M-PALM, who is working on a project to provide information to people moving to the area as part of the federal government's military base realignment, came yesterday to learn more about transit plans that will become increasingly important with expected population growth.

"Fort Meade is going to become the ... Silicon Valley for the government," said Shannon. "With all of that, it requires an incredible amount of focus on how we're going to move people. I'm excited about what's going on in Baltimore City to the point where I'm going to relocate here. Baltimore City has a lot to offer."

While a bus system is still in the running for the MTA's final choice, much of the discussion yesterday focused on light rail.

Maryland Transportation Secretary John D. Porcari said there has been much innovation in the design of light rail cars since Baltimore's system opened 15 years ago: They are sleeker and lower to the ground now, making them fit into the scale of communities better, he said.

"We are going to make sure this system is built into the fabric of the community," he said. "That is our pledge to you."

Lee Kemp, chairman of the board of the Regional Transit District of Denver, said transit expansion in Denver has yielded new jobs, reduced traffic and offered other quality-of-life improvements through a system that transports 97 million passengers each year.

"The community is an important part of making this all happen," he said. "If we don't address the transportation needs today, it's going to be miserable in the future."

Baltimore officials hope to be able to take their Red Line proposal to public hearing by fall.

Rushon Brooks, 63, who inherited his parents' house near the West Baltimore MARC station in 2005, had attended a few meetings on the Red Line before coming to the summit.

"It would go about two blocks from my residence," he said of the house where his son now lives. "The value of the property would go up."

Others who attended yesterday had business ventures in mind that could be located near stations as part of what officials term transit-oriented development — residential, retail and office projects that cluster around transit stops in a model that has been successful around the country.

The idea of an east-west transit line in Baltimore is one that the **Greater Baltimore Committee** has backed for six years.

Existing lines come within two blocks of one another downtown, but don't connect, **Donald Fry, president of the GBC**, said in an interview.

"In a region that's highly populated, you can't just rely on highways," Fry said in an interview. "We've got to have strong mobility if we're going to grow by the hundreds of thousands that we're projected to grow by in coming years. If you wait until transportation becomes a crisis, it's too difficult to build out of it."

The region already is starting to see congestion problems, he noted.

State Sen. Verna L. Jones, a Baltimore Democrat, said she hoped that the work being done on the project would "make sure that a 'highway to nowhere' never happens again in Baltimore."

Baltimore's "Highway to Nowhere" is an aborted freeway that starts west out of downtown then suddenly terminates after about 1½ miles instead of continuing on as planned to link Interstate 70 and Interstate 95. Once-stable neighborhoods were ripped up to make room for six lanes of sunken highway, now part of U.S. 40.

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