

## Opinion

### COMMENTARY

# Connecting the transit dots: We must have the Red Line

Believe it or not, the 14.6-mile east-west rapid-transit Red Line from Woodlawn to Johns Hopkins Bayview Medical campus in Southeast Baltimore is in the final stage of the planning process.



By Donald C. Fry

Public hearings on the project concluded Nov. 13. After Jan. 5, the deadline for written public comment, Maryland Department of Transportation officials and Gov. Martin O'Malley will review

comments and recommend one of 12 alternative plans for the line to the Federal Transit Administration.

If federal funding is granted, engineering work would begin and the Red Line's construction could start as early as July 2012.

Should the governor recommend Alternative 4C — a proposed \$1.6 billion light rail line with tunnels downtown and on a portion of the western leg that is supported by the Greater Baltimore Committee, other transit advocates, and environmental and civic organizations — this would be the region's most significant transportation project in a generation.

However, few people in Baltimore outside of the neighborhoods on the Red Line's route seem to know much about the project nor grasp its potential impact. That's the thing about major transportation projects, particularly transit. They're the ultimate long-term projects. They're expensive and they take years, often decades to develop.

They're on a long-range "to do" list in a short-range civic and political culture. Transit projects can drop off the radar, or they can stay on the edges of the radar, but lose their urgency.

That's what has happened to transit in Baltimore during the last 40 years.

#### Plans from the past

As early as 1968, plans had been developed for a regional rail rapid-transit system.

The map of the 1968 plan is almost identical to the current regional rail-transit plan map that was developed in 2002.

But after four decades, Greater Baltimore still lacks a comprehensive, interconnected, rapid-transit system that provides fast, practical options for its residents to get around the region in something other than an automobile.

As the 1968 rail plan map demonstrates, it hasn't been for lack of vision.

Our region has lurched forward in spurts, building pieces of a system. A heavy rail metro line along the northwest corridor from Pikesville to downtown Baltimore opened in 1983. In 1987 it was extended to Owings Mills. In 1995 a downtown extension eastward to the Johns Hopkins medical institutions opened. A light rail line opened in 1992 that now extends from Hunt Valley to Anne Arundel County.

This leaves the Baltimore region with two north-south rail transit lines — a 15-mile heavy rail line and a 30-mile light rail line that today carry 45,000 and 29,000 daily passengers respectively, but do not connect with each other.

By contrast, within the last three decades, at least five comparable metropolitan areas — Portland, San Diego, Denver, Dallas and St. Louis — have built light rail systems that are longer, interconnected and carry two to three times as many passengers as Baltimore's light rail. And of course, Washington, D.C. and its Maryland and Virginia suburbs have an 86-station, 106-mile heavy rail metro with more than 795,000 riders per weekday — admittedly a special case, since it's the nation's capital.

Nevertheless, these are sobering comparisons. Baltimore's Red Line would change things, however. Its construction would resolve many of our region's transit shortcomings at a reasonable capital cost for the benefits that would be derived.

#### Quest for connectivity

Red Line light rail Alternative 4C, which includes tunnels under Cooks Lane in the west and under downtown Baltimore and Fells Point, would transform our region's current transit hodgepodge into an integrated rail transit system, providing connectivity that we're now lacking.

Its sleek, modern light rail would connect with MARC commuter rail as well as with Baltimore's existing metro and light rail lines, giving commuters, visitors and residents genuine, practical alternatives to driving to many areas in all directions.

The Red Line would add 42,000 transit passengers per day, cut the region's east-west transit travel times in half, and result in 67,000 fewer daily automobile miles traveled, the MTA estimates.

It would serve more than 7,500 businesses and 192,000 workers along its route.

Building it would generate 17,000 construction jobs. Economic development along the corridor would create an estimated 33,000 permanent jobs.

Despite difficult fiscal times, the Red Line is fully poised to get off the drawing board. This is our one chance to put major quality into the Baltimore region's rail transit system. We must make sure that Maryland's transportation and government leaders aggressively move Alternative 4C forward to get it funded and built.

We must take full advantage of this opportunity to take our region's transit system to the next level.

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