

One of the existing light rail trains heads north toward the Patapsco light rail and bus stop in South Baltimore. BALTIMORE SUN PHOTO: EARL MERTON FLEMMER

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After six years of planning and a recent round of public hearings, a clear consensus has emerged among civic and business leaders about what a long-debated east-west transit line through Baltimore would look like — if it is ever built in the face of determined community opposition.

While a half-dozen alternatives for building the so-called Red Line remain on the table, most of them have been practically eliminated either as a result of excessive cost or lagging support.

Supporters say the Red Line — which would serve some of the area's largest employers and intersect the north-south Central Light Rail Line — fills a glaring gap in Baltimore's transportation network. If the project can make it through the federal approval process and avoid the pitfalls of racial politics surrounding it, the line could open as early as 2012.

The favored alternative, openly supported by the **Greater Baltimore Committee** and tacitly backed by Mayor Sheila Dixon, is the one that the Maryland Transit Administration calls 4-C.

It would be a \$1.6 billion, 14.6-mile light rail line from Johns Hopkins Bayview Medical Center to the Medicare-Medicaid complex in Woodlawn. Another possibility, a bus system that would run in dedicated lanes, received scant attention during the recent public hearings.

The 4-C line would serve such employment cen-

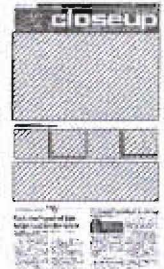
ters as the Social Security Administration, Bayview and the University of Maryland, Baltimore. By connecting with the existing north-south light rail line and the Metro subway, it would greatly expand the reach of rail transit in the Baltimore region. It would run underground in two tunnels — one along Cooks Lane in West Baltimore and the other through downtown, Inner Harbor East and Fells Point — and have surface sections as well.

"For the first time, we have the beginning of a true transit system rather than mere transit lines," GBC President Donald C. Fry said at a public hearing.

Where the alternative runs into fierce opposition is where it emerges from the ground.

The 4-C line would run on the surface along Edmondson Avenue (U.S. 40) through the neighborhoods of Edmondson Village and Allendale. The MTA has signaled that an alternative with a tunnel along Edmondson Avenue would cost far too much to give it any chance of being approved by the Federal Transit Administration, which will weigh the costs and benefits of the MTA's Red Line proposal against competing projects around the country.

Many residents of these and other nearby low-income, mostly African-American neighborhoods, see surface light rail as not only a threat to their way of life but also a form of racial discrimination. Recently, several hundred local residents attended a raucous public hearing at Edmondson High School in the heart of the Red Line corridor to cheer lustily as op-



ponents voiced their suspicions about the project. See **TRAIN**, page 4

Minority and low-income neighborhoods are getting all the surface track, while white and affluent neighborhoods are getting tunneled under, thundered Don Sherrod, president of the Rognel Heights Civic Association.

"The white people protested, and they're getting it underground," he said.

In fact, the 4-C alternative would tunnel under the largely African-American neighborhoods along Cooks Lane, while the surface portions would include such majority-white neighborhoods as Canton and Highlandtown.

Defenders of the 4-C option say there are valid engineering reasons for tunneling under the narrow streets of Fells Point and though the constricted, residential Cooks Lane corridor, but Sherrod's argument still resonates in West Baltimore.

Many residents there have unhappy memories of being displaced in the 1960s and 1970s by white decision-makers intent on extending Interstate 70 into the heart of Baltimore.

Those plans were thwarted, but not until many lost homes and saw neighborhoods cut in half by the infamous Road to Nowhere — the truncated interstate now part of U.S. 40.

Gertude D. Hack, president of the Allendale Community Association, said she polled residents of her neighborhood and found them opposed to surface light rail. "If you cannot go underground, they say no-build," she said.

"No build," is in fact one of the alternatives. While that is favored by many in the community, building nothing is a course with a serious downside.

One of the main reasons for the Red Line is that congestion on U.S. 40 in the west and along Eastern Ave. and other East Baltimore streets has increased in recent decades and is projected to get worse. In Edmondson Village, for instance, U.S. 40 turns into a busy commuter route every weekday morning and evening as three lanes of traffic speed through West Baltimore with drivers from destinations such as Ellicott City and Catonsville — leaving behind little but their exhaust fumes.

City planners have a different vision for the neighborhood. By converting a lane in each direction to transit use and slowing traffic, planners say they could make U.S. 40 a less attractive commuter route and induce many suburbanites to leave their cars at a park-and-ride and take the train downtown.

Some of the resistance to surface light rail flows from Baltimoreans' experience with the north-south line that opened in the early 1990s. Part of an early generation of light rail lines around the country, the line has had numerous operational problems over the years and has been blamed by some as a contributing factor in the decline of

Howard Street.

Jamie Kendrick, deputy director of the city's Department of Transportation, said any new light rail system would represent a newer generation of technology — operating more quietly, more smoothly and lower to the ground.

"We have the opportunity to do this totally differently."

Some opponents of the limited-tunneling plan say the proposal doesn't differ enough from the current system. They want to force the MTA to go back to the drawing board, even at the cost of a delayed start to construction, to study a heavy-rail system such as the Metro subway.

The MTA recently made an informal examination of heavy rail but concluded that it was too expensive.

Edward Cohen, founder and past president of the Transit Riders Action Council, contends that the agency judged heavy and light rail by different standards. "The MTA rigged the heavy rail examination," said Cohen, whose group says the higher speeds of a subway would attract more ridership.

The Red Line also faces lingering opposition in East Baltimore, where some residents of the Canton waterfront share the same concerns as their West Baltimore counterparts about a surface rail line.

Gov. Martin O'Malley will decide what is called the "locally preferred alternative" early next year after receiving the MTA's recommendation. There is little in his record to suggest he wouldn't go along with the GBC and the city administration.

But neighborhood groups and transit advocates are unlikely to concede the last word to the governor. They are already threatening to take the matter to court and to the General Assembly.

Kendrick said it would be unfortunate if their opposition prevailed. "If we miss this opportunity right now, we could miss it for a generation."

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