

GOVERNMENT

State cutting \$1.1B from transportation

*Porcari says maintenance,
safety won't be sacrificed*

BY ANDY ROSEN

andy.rosen@mddailyrecord.com

ANNAPOLIS — Falling revenues have forced the state to cut back on planned transportation projects by \$1.1 billion over the next six years, according to new projections announced Wednesday.

The spending cuts, announced a day after state officials got word that they could face a nearly \$1 billion deficit by fiscal 2010, reduce transportation spending between now and 2017 to \$9.4 billion. They will slow the expansion of MARC service and also cut in half the \$10



JOHN D. PORCARI

million that was set aside for improvements to Broening Highway, the road that feeds the public terminals at the **Port of Baltimore**.

Still, Transportation Secretary John D. Porcari said none of the affected work would involve safety and maintenance projects such as bridge repair.

"The philosophy we've had is 'fix it first,'" he said.

Many of the Maryland's highest-profile

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projects will see planned spending reduced, including the proposed Red Line Rail Project, and the **Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority's Purple Line Extension**.

Porcari said that is planning money that can be spent later. He said those reductions would not affect either project's eligibility for crucial federal funding.

Though the state's transportation fund draws on different revenue streams than the general fund, they are also languishing as the economy struggles. Three key transportation revenues are the state's gasoline tax, titling tax and vehicle registration fees. They are all declining as fewer people are driving and buying new cars, Porcari said.

Though the state's planned spending was curtailed by those declining revenues, Porcari said he was concerned about a more immediate problem that could affect ongoing projects. The federal highway trust fund is set to "dry up" next year, and federal transportation officials told the state last week that they would slow down — and potentially cut back on — reimbursements that the state already expects in project budgets.

Transportation advocates from the Baltimore area said they were concerned by many of the cuts — especially to MARC — but were glad the Red Line will stay on track. The proposed line, which has been estimated to cost \$1.5 billion, would connect Woodlawn to Southeast Baltimore, and many have also touted it as a way to connect service on the existing light rail and Metro subway lines.

"That East-West connection is crucial," said Otis Rolley III, who heads the **Central Maryland Transportation**

Alliance. "It is part of a bigger plan, and is important to more than just Baltimore."

The federal government has allocated \$100 million for the project, and the state has pledged an additional \$140 million.

The Red Line budget will be reduced by \$17.6 million, but Rolley said he is confident that Porcari was correct in saying the reduction would not slow the project. Still, though he said MARC improvements that have been planned over the last several years were ambitious, Rolley also believes they are long overdue and must be completed.

Donald C. Fry, president and CEO of the **Greater Baltimore Committee**, also said he was pleased with the treatment of the Red Line, but disappointed with the MARC cuts. All told, MARC will lose about \$179.3 million by 2014, including money for station improvements.

Fry said the decline in planned revenue highlights the need to use money that is not so directly tied to the gasoline tax. The GBC is looking into alternative ways for Maryland to pay for transportation improvements, he said.

"Are there ways of doing [this] so we don't reach these situations whenever we have declines in these revenue sources?" he asked.

Sen. Catharine E. Pugh, D-Baltimore City, who is chairwoman of the **Senate Finance Committee's** subcommittee on transportation, said she thinks Baltimore came through the cuts in good shape. She said it was positive to keep \$5 million for Broening Highway, since other projects lost out completely.

She said she was OK with some of the spending reductions to transit project, including a reduction in money to study an expansion of the Metro subway "if it's more of a timing issue than a nonfunding issue."