

State announces 1.1 billion in cuts to highway and transit projects

By Len Lazarick
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State Transportation Secretary John Porcari announced Wednesday \$1.1 billion in cuts to highway and transit projects over the next six years, but motorists and riders will see little immediate effect on their commutes.

There will be more long-term delays in major highway improvements - such as the building of the high-occupancy and toll lanes on Interstate 95 in Baltimore County.

Porcari said "fix it first" was the priority in making the reductions, due to a \$115 million annual drop in transportation revenues. "The first dollar goes to system preservation," he told reporters, such as highway and bridge repaving.

At \$9.4 billion through fiscal 2014, "it is still a larger capital program than Gov. O'Malley inherited," Porcari said. Reduced gasoline use due to high prices and lower vehicle sales in a slowing economy caused the cuts, even before the federal government announced reduced reimbursement from its Highway Trust Fund.

All major projects already in the works, such as the InterCounty Connector in Montgomery County and planning of new lines for the Baltimore and Washington Metro systems, will be funded, but completion dates will be put off. Purchases of new cars and locomotives for MARC commuter train system will also continue, but station improvements will be delayed.

Intersection improvements related to BRAC job transfers near Aberdeen Proving Ground, Fort Meade and Bethesda National Naval Medical Center will also be made as planned, but larger road improvements will be put off.

"We hope to get a lot of them back on track" once the economy improves, Gov. Martin O'Malley said at a Board of Public Works meeting.

"The general population is probably not going to see any immediate effect," said Don Fry, president of the **Greater Baltimore Committee** who has lobbied for greater transportation funding. "This is certainly a step back."

"We have a significant transportation infrastructure crisis facing us," Fry said. "It's going to start affecting lifestyle and quality of life."

The transportation cuts were just the latest bad news this week from state government, which faces cuts in other areas of the budget because of lower sales and income tax receipts.

"This is primarily due to the national downturn in the economy," O'Malley said. "There will be cuts. It will be painful. It will be painful in the short term and it will probably be more painful over the next couple of years." He said it will be "infinitely more painful" if slots aren't approved.

"No one has a crystal ball that tells us when we're going to come out of this and get back on the upswing," the governor said. "But when we do, we're going to come out of it more quickly and actually more strongly than other states in the union."

Staff Writer Jaime Malarkey contributed to this story.

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