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Transit projects face crowded field — starting in Maryland

■ Corridor Cities Transitway, Purple Line and Red Line seek inside track for federal dollars

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Against a backdrop of stiff competition for federal funding and a bleak state fiscal outlook, state leaders are touting Maryland's trio of mass transit projects as equals — but depending on who is asked, some might be more equal than others.

Gov. Martin O'Malley (D) has been careful not to show favor for the Purple Line in Montgomery and Prince George's counties, the Red Line in Baltimore or the Corridor Cities Transitway in upper Montgomery. He settled on the alignment and light rail for the Purple and Red lines last month, and is expected to announce his decision for the route and mode of transportation for the CCT by the end of the year. Those decisions are precursors to a federal decision on which, if any, of Maryland's projects are approved for construction funding. It is unclear when Congress will take up a new federal transportation bill that pays for such projects after the current five-year bill ends this month.

Some see political battles looming over the prospect of having two projects in the state's Washington suburbs and one in Baltimore. And even with federal funding for half or more of the Purple Line, Red Line and CCT's capital costs — at least $3.8 billion combined — consensus is widespread that the state will struggle to support its share of three projects at once.

The state's depleted pool of transportation dollars is enough to maintain existing roads but little else, said Sen. Nancy J. King, vice-chairwoman of the Budget and Taxation committee.

"Unless we find some way to put money in the Transportation Trust Fund, we're not going to be able to fund any of them," said King (D-Dist. 39) of Montgomery Village. "It would be a miracle to get two. [Three is] not even in my imagination."

'On their own merits'

Under the New Starts program, the Federal Transit Administration evaluates projects according to expected daily riders, benefit to commuters and capital and operating costs.

New Starts funding for multiple projects in one area is not unheard of. Not only do a number of states have more than one project in the queue, several cities do — New York City has four, while Denver, Salt Lake City, Seattle and Houston each have two.

The 16-mile, $1.68 billion Purple Line would carry 60,000 daily riders and link the Metrorail Red Line at Bethesda and Silver Spring to the Green Line at College Park and the Orange Line at New Carrollton.

The $1.6 billion Baltimore Red Line would be the city's first cross-town rail route, carrying 42,000 daily riders along a 14-mile stretch between Woodlawn and Johns Hopkins's Bayview medical complex.

The CCT would extend 14 miles beyond Shady Grove metro station and run through the state's largest hub of biotech before reaching Germantown and Clarksburg. It would cost $780 million as light rail and $450 million as rapid bus. Both modes would carry roughly 30,000 daily riders.

Not everyone sees the projects as headed on a collision course.

"Some are trying to paint these three projects that we are pushing as competitive," said Del. William A. Bronrott (D-Dist. 16) of Bethesda. "I think that they will be considered on their own merits. I think they will also be viewed as being simpatico."

Others say that the political dimensions are inescapable.

"If the FTA provides a willingness to participate in some way on the Purple Line and on the Red Line, it does seem very hard to believe that you could also get them to participate in the CCT," said Sen. Richard Madaleno (D-Dist. 18) of Kensington. "It does seem to me hard to believe that another group of bureaucrats at the federal government could be so walled off from any political pressure that they would select three projects from the same state."

State leaders are quick to point out the advantage the projects will gain on the strength of Maryland's federal delegation and the appointment of former state transportation secretary John D. Porcari as deputy secretary of the U.S. Department of Transportation.

But stiffening competition for those federal dollars is bound to fuel an in-state political showdown, said Ben Ross, president of the Action Committee for Transit.

"Montgomery County only has eight votes in the state senate, so we have to make alliances any time we want something," he said. "The political reality is that you've got to have one in Baltimore and one in Washington."

Ross said the Purple Line will benefit Montgomery County more than the CCT: it traverses College Park, downtown Bethesda and downtown Silver Spring, the region's "three densest and most walkable areas" while connecting bus and commuter rail lines "in a way that increases the value of the metro line we've already got," he said.

Parity of Maryland's metropolitan areas is at stake, said Donald C. Fry, president and CEO of the Greater Baltimore Committee, making the case that Baltimore is every bit "an equal economic engine" as Montgomery County.

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"This Red Line would be the first big step to having a true integrated system" in Baltimore, Fry said. "For one of the first times in decades, the stars are aligned that we have the opportunity to get two projects funded. It's still going to be a significant lift for our [representatives], but I think there is reason to believe and to pursue two projects at the same time."

"The political reality is that you've got to have one in Baltimore and one in Washington."

Ben Ross, Action Committee for Transit

TRANSIT TUG OF WAR?

State officials will in the months to come push the Federal Transit Administration to pay for half or more of the downcounty's Purple Line and upcounty's Corridor Cities Transitway. With the Baltimore Red Line in the hunt for the same pool of funding, skeptics question whether federal and state purses will have room for all three.

	Purple	Red Line	CCT
Decision on path, mode	Yes	Yes	No
Cost	$1.7B, light rail	$1.6B, light rail	$450M if bus, $777M if rail
Path	16 miles, Bethesda to New Carrollton	14 miles, Woodlawn to JHU-Bayview	14 miles, Shady Grove Metro to near Clarksburg
Estimated daily riders	65,000	54,000	30,000
Controversy	Chevy Chase may sue over path	Residents upset with path and construction	Light rail or rapid bus?

SOURCE: MARYLAND TRANSIT ADMINISTRATION

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