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Seeing red

Plans for the long-awaited transit line spanning Baltimore County and the city are coming into focus

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Plans for Baltimore's most realistic option for a new mass transit system are expected to materialize in 2008, prodded by unprecedented support from transportation, business and government officials.

Various options are still on the table for the proposed Red Line, a mass transit line to connect Woodlawn to Canton Crossing and **Johns Hopkins Bayview Medical Center**, including beefed-up bus service in dedicated transit lanes, underground tunnels and light rail.

The **Maryland Transit Administration** will continue reviewing the options with public input, and at this time next year, a plan could be set, said Henry Kay, MTA deputy administrator for planning and engineering.

Advancement of the project could be buoyed by support from Baltimore City officials, who are putting an emphasis on transit-oriented development in the city's future.

"One of the most important next steps we can take is to strengthen our resolve to build the Red Line," Mayor Sheila Dixon said in her inaugural address Dec. 4. "By doing this, we'll send a clear signal to Annapolis and Washington that Baltimore is ready for the Red Line."

Dixon's spokesman, Sterling Clifford, said in an interview that "the timing is right for the Red Line."

The **Greater Baltimore Committee**, a regional business advocacy group, is pushing the project on behalf of its members as well. The **GBC** lists the Red Line as a top priority for local economic development, and CEO Donald C. Fry has said it could be a boon for the Baltimore business community.

'In the ballgame'

Gov. Martin O'Malley has pushed the Red Line among a handful of key state transit projects, supporting a \$400 million boost to transportation funding that the General Assembly approved in a special session in November.

Funding could be a tenuous issue for the project, officials said, but the outlook is promising.

"Without any sort of an increase, we never could have even talked about moving these lines forward," Fry said of the funding added to the Transportation Trust Fund last month. "The next key is at the federal level."

More than half of the project's estimated \$1.5 billion budget is expected to come from the federal government, Fry said.

MTA planning and collaboration with the affected communities will help secure the money, officials said -- the process is a requirement to get the funding, Kay said.

"You want to make sure you present a project that has the most efficient costs, serves a lot of people and addresses travel time so it's competitive" with others from across the country seeking funding, Fry said. "We're certainly going to be in the ballgame when it comes to federal funding."

Routes and modes

On tap next is an environmental impact study, expected in the summer of 2008, that will further detail the benefits and ramifications of the different options on the table. Engineering is scheduled for 2008 to 2012 and construction for 2012 to 2016.

While the route of the various alternatives is essentially the same, the differences lie in mode of transportation and elevation. If it's built -- one option that's required to be considered is inaction, Kay said -- the Red Line will run on one of the following:

- A beefed-up east-west route of the current bus service;
- Light rail;
- Bus Rapid Transit, which uses regular buses and can run on city streets in dedicated transit lanes, increasing frequency and reliability of service.

Also in question is how much of any of the modes would run on the street surface and how much would be taken into underground tunnels through downtown or other areas.

Needing a lot more

While the aim is for the Red Line to be a reality in 10 years, it's expected to be the only regional transit priority to be put into place between now and 2035.

A regional transportation plan compiled by the **Baltimore Regional Transportation Board**, a group of county executives, includes the Red Line as the top "regionally significant" project and the sole brand-new transit project expected to be funded and built by that time.

Transit advocates criticized the plan's heavy focus on highways, and the board slightly boosted projected spending on transit. The other project on its list includes improvements to MARC commuter train service.

Art Cohen, president of transportation advocacy group **B'More Mobile**, said he thinks the MTA should make more of an effort to include region residents in planning. He also criticized what he said is a limited focus on transit.