

BREAKING GROUND

Federal funding for BRAC
positive sign for transit needs

By Jason Flanagan
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County and state officials hope the trickle of a \$21 million federal transportation funding package will lead to a deluge of money needed to pay for improvements around Maryland bases.

"This will help with some of the initiatives that are key elements to the state's game plan," said Jack Callahan, Maryland Department of Transportation spokesman. "When the funds become available, they will be dedicated to the most urgent priority."

U.S. Sens. Barbara Mikulski and Ben Cardin announced Wednesday a Senate spending bill that will help fund MARC train improvements, a bus depot at Fort Meade and improved access to Aberdeen Proving Ground.

The improvements will help the area brace for Base Realignment and Closure, which will bring thousands of jobs to the region. The bill could be passed by the end of the month.

The cost of these projects, especially those for MARC, far outweigh

the funding the bill could provide once approved later this month.

State funding needs to be secured now to keep transit projects afloat, officials said.

"The question is, how do you get the state to focus on this issue in light of the budget crisis," said Donald Fry, president of the Greater Baltimore Committee and former state senator. "We need an infusion of revenue into the transportation trust fund. If we fail to address them now, we'll never get caught up."

But officials are encouraged about the funding, especially at Fort Meade. The money will help push the Maryland Transit Center, a regional bus depot and maintenance facility, into the planning and design phase.

The depot will serve as a hub for Howard and Anne Arundel counties, and provide bus service to the fort and MARC train stations.

"We consider this facility a cog in the puzzle put in place for both Howard and Anne Arundel counties," said Bob Leib, Anne Arundel's BRAC coordinator.

Officials said the Senate's actions show a commitment to MARC, but

warn more is needed to prep the rails for the coming work force.

"What this buys is more carrying capacity," said George Cardwell, Anne Arundel's transportation administrator. "... But it takes time and money to replace and upgrade the system. You have to invest a lot in commuter rail."

Funds for APG are expected to help improve access to the fort from Interstate 95 by extending roads to the main gate, APG spokesman George Mercer said.

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AT A GLANCE

U.S. Senate approved spending package includes:

- » \$13 million for MARC improvements, including new locomotives, railcars and studies for new stations
- » \$3 million for improved access to Aberdeen Proving Ground
- » \$1 million towards the Central Maryland Transit Center at Fort Meade
- » \$1 million towards the Bi-County Transit Center in Langley Park

