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## Transportation outlook cloudy for Baltimore

**T**ransportation Outlook 2035 bills itself as "Creating a Blueprint for the Baltimore Region's Future." As the long-range transportation plan for Baltimore City and the five surrounding counties, this document — and the decisions that flow from it — can influence how our communities grow and function in the decades ahead. Still in draft form, the report outlines how billions could be spent on highways, transit facilities and transportation system operations throughout the region.

While an earlier planning effort, the now almost-forgotten Vision 2030, had the potential to reshape the region into one that channels growth to public transit hubs and helps to reduce suburban sprawl — and traffic — the current document lacks a cohesive vision.

Comments from public officials and citizens at the recent final public hearing in Canton in Baltimore City made its shortcomings clear.

State Planning Secretary Richard Hall reminded those in attendance of the principles of Smart Growth established in 1997 and the challenges in meeting them. Concerns about environmental stewardship and achieving acceptable levels of air quality were featured in the presentation of Shari Wilson, secretary of the environment. Secretary of Transportation John Porcari noted that the state's vision for transportation is guided by "balance" — particularly a balance in the provision of highway and transit facilities.

Among those who studied the proposed transportation plan, many saw investments that would yield new congested highways, serving sprawling development and offering fewer transportation choices than they deemed possible. As the microphone was opened to comments by a wide array of area organizations and individuals, it was striking how little the considerations raised by the Cabinet officers were being observed in Outlook 2035.

Don Fry, president and CEO of the **Greater Baltimore Committee**, noted some key deficiencies in Outlook 2035, including the omission of critical transit projects, notably the Green Line presented in the 2002 Regional Rail Plan, substantial improvements for the MARC commuter rail system, and the failure to make the investments necessary to support base realignment-induced growth.

Public comments showed the BRTB stepping back from earlier commitments to a more robust regional transit system. The balance of new investments was seen as swinging decidedly in favor of more lanes of highways to the detriment of new rail transit facilities. And, there was no overall vision to guide the choice of major investments. Instead, in the words

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of Irene Poulsen, representing the Neighborhood Design Center, there was a mere "stapling together" of local plans containing predetermined roadway projects.

Another citizen noted that it was the BRTB in 2003 that took a leadership position, advocating for maintaining both the Red and Green transit lines as its priority transit projects — something the state responded to with planning funds.

Joseph T. "Jody" Landers, executive vice president of the Greater Baltimore Board of Realtors, said, "We need a plan for the region that citizens and elected leaders alike can embrace enthusiastically. A plan that presents a bold vision for the future of the region, and that will enable us to continue to compete now and into the next several decades. It isn't going to happen unless you collectively and individually make this a priority and put some creativity and resources behind it."

He's right. Resources are the key. Of course, all of the major transportation improvements being advocated must compete with other big-ticket highway and transit needs across the state. Porcari has consistently advocated for more money for the Maryland Transportation Fund, on the order of \$400 million to \$600 million a year.

The plan's fatal flaw is its constrained view of the funds available for strategic transportation investments. The fiscal estimates are based on the recent history of transportation spending. This includes a 15-year period with no rise in the gasoline tax, which represents an aberration from earlier periods of funding for transportation.

But, it's not too late. Revised estimates of transportation revenues in 2008 might yield another \$200 million to \$300 million annually for the Baltimore region. That would allow for a plan update presenting a rebalancing of the investments for transit and roadways. These strategic decisions should serve to support a region with a higher quality of life and enhanced economic vitality.

