

MARC budget needs tallied: 28-year expansion put at \$3.9 billion

By Michael Dresser | Sun Reporter

A plan to transform the MARC commuter rail service into a fully functional, seven-days-a-week urban transit system would cost an estimated \$3.9 billion over the next three decades, according to an outline released yesterday by the Maryland Transit Administration.

The plan, first reported by The Sun on Monday, would extend the service from Delaware to Virginia while more than tripling the current capacity of the overcrowded train system.

The \$3.9 billion figure is especially imposing because it is expressed in 2007 dollars. By the end of the planning period in 2035, inflation could add billions to the final total.

MTA Administrator Paul J. Wiedefeld said the state Transportation Trust Fund would not be the sole source of funding under Maryland's proposal, which would add freight and intercity passenger rail capacity to the system as well as benefiting MARC.

Wiedefeld said the state and federal governments, private developers and the railroads that own the track -- Amtrak and Florida-based CSX Corp. -- are also likely sources of money to pay for the expansion.

The MTA chief said the initial response from CSX, owner of the Camden and Brunswick lines, and Amtrak, owner of the Penn Line, has been positive.

Amtrak "welcomed the whole plan from the perspective of getting things out there," he said.

Wiedefeld said that determining who would pay how much and for what would be the result of "a negotiation process over time."

Bob Sullivan, a spokesman for CSX, said the company has received the plan. "We understand the need and we look forward to working with the MTA to address the demand for freight and passenger rail transportation in Maryland," he said.

Calls to the Amtrak press office were not returned yesterday.

The \$3.9 billion plan calls for spending hundreds of millions of dollars in each of the categories of rail infrastructure, stations and parking, storage and maintenance, and railroad cars and locomotives. The most expensive category would be the rail system itself, with a proposed \$1.7 billion in new spending.

In addition to the capital plan, the expansion would require more than doubling annual operating costs. By 2035, it would cost \$169 million, in 2007 dollars, to run a system that now costs \$78 million annually.

Wiedefeld acknowledged that the plan assumes periodic increases in state transportation revenue such as Gov. Martin O'Malley's recently announced plan to raise an additional \$392 million a year in transportation revenues. That plan relies primarily on an increase in the vehicle titling tax and on increases in corporate taxes.

Donald C. Fry, president of the **Greater Baltimore Committee**, said a long-range expansion of MARC is among the business group's highest priorities, particularly with thousands of additional defense jobs expected in

Maryland as a result of the military's base realignment and closure process. He called the MTA plan "the next appropriate step to be taken."

Fry said the plan would have a "positive statewide impact" but that the governor's plan would not provide enough money for the Transportation Trust Fund to accomplish it.

"This is an example of why we need to have an investment of \$600 million rather than \$400 million in the trust," he said.

The GBC supports a 10-cent increase in the state's 23.5-cents-a-gallon gasoline tax, which has not been raised since 1992. O'Malley has said he is open to a gasoline tax increase, but for now he has called only for tying future increases to construction cost increases.

The state will also face challenges securing federal money because of a rapid depletion in the federal transportation fund, largely a result of the Bush administration's refusal to raise the federal fuel tax.

U.S. Rep. Elijah E. Cummings, a Baltimore Democrat who is chairman of a House transportation subcommittee that oversees rail infrastructure, said the MTA has told him that it will need about \$200 million in the next several years for MARC growth.

"I expect our delegation to be supportive, and I know I will be," he said. "With BRAC coming and our roads being congested, we've got to find ways to get folks off the highways and on the trains."

Cummings said that won't be easy with the current state of federal transportation funding.

"We've got to figure out for the federal level where this money is going to come from," he said.

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