



Montgomery County Council

From the office of Councilmember Tom Perez

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Statement of Councilmember Tom Perez in Support of Real Transportation Solutions and Different Council Priorities

The first measure that any elective body chooses to take up at the beginning of a new session is meant to send a signal to the people about the priorities of that body. In taking up the resolution on the Inter-County Connector as the first resolution of the 15th Council, this body appears to be telling residents of Montgomery County that the ICC is the most important item on our agenda. With all due respect to my colleagues, I strongly disagree.

The most important item on our agenda for the upcoming year undoubtedly will be the budget crisis. We are confronting a budget deficit of at least \$300 million dollars. If the state attempts to balance its budget on the backs of local governments, this figure will undoubtedly rise. We have some tough choices to make here in Montgomery County, and it seems to me that the first thing that this council ought to do is pass a resolution that acknowledges that the most important item of business in 2003 will be closing the budget gap, and implores our colleagues in Annapolis to ensure that the state budget is not balanced at the expense of local government.

We should also give a sense to the residents of Montgomery County of some overarching principles that will inform our deliberations on the budget crisis. For me, I recognize that there are many competing priorities, and we will have to make some tough choices. I will focus on three: 1) continuing the progress we have made in educating our children; 2) ensuring public safety; and 3) protecting the safety net for our most vulnerable residents, including our seniors. Passing a resolution such as this, in my judgment, better reflects our current needs.

As I have watched the debate on the ICC unfold over the past year, I have observed a number of troubling trends. While I appreciate that the passion both
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sides bring to the discussion, the debate all too frequently has become personal and absolute. I hope that on this and other issues, we can agree to disagree without being disagreeable. I also hope that we can resist the temptation to speak in absolutes: those who oppose the ICC do not support gridlock. Those who support the ICC are not lackeys for developers. We all have a shared interest in reducing traffic congestion. We need to have a robust, respectful debate on how to get there.

We have a congestion crisis and an air quality crisis in this county. It is critically important for us to recognize that the two crises go hand in hand. A federal appeals court has told us in no uncertain terms that if we do not get our environmental act together and come up with a plan to ensure compliance with the Clean Air Act, we will lose critical federal dollars. So if we do not address the air quality crisis, the congestion crisis will get worse, because we will lose critical federal dollars that fund critical road improvement projects.

I oppose the ICC resolution for a number of reasons. First and foremost, I believe this project does not, and can never satisfy the test of appreciably reducing congestion *and* increasing air quality. We are all frustrated by traffic congestion. However, there is a myth that seems have been developed that once the ICC is built, traffic congestion will go away, and gridlock on the beltway and I-270 will virtually disappear. There is no magic bullet to solve traffic congestion. With or without the ICC, we will still have significant traffic congestion along the beltway, the I-95 corridor, and the I-270 corridor. This is a fact of life we must acknowledge. Studies showing a 5-7% reduction in traffic with an ICC mean that there will be 95 cars instead of 100 cars in front of you. In these tough financial times, this does not make economic sense.

Instead, we should invest in a host of projects--road improvement, road construction, and mass transit-- that can reduce congestion and increase air quality. I am a strong supporter of the Inner Purple Line and the Corridor Cities Transitways. These projects will reduce congestion without harming the environment. The Inner Purple Line will spur economic development in critical areas such as Langley Park, Long Branch and Silver Spring. There is a host of road improvement and road construction projects that can be implemented in our lifetime without harming the environment, and these projects will not break the bank.

Some will say we can have everything, that is, we can build the ICC and complete these other road improvement projects. I do not agree. Look at the recent experience in Virginia with the mixing bowl project in Springfield. According to a recent audit by the US Department of Transportation Inspector

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General, the project has tripled in cost as a result of lax oversight and consistently low estimates of cost. These cost overruns, according to the Inspector General, have resulted in the state canceling or delaying smaller projects. I am fearful that the same thing will happen in Maryland if the ICC is built. For instance, I am very concerned that if this study is approved, the state will nix funding for the continued expansion of 28-198. This project has been strongly supported by the council, and must continue. The era of "we can do everything" is over.

I have said previously that I am confident that the ICC cannot be built in a manner that will withstand environmental scrutiny, and I continue to believe this. I would support a study, and indeed I have indicated previously that I would support a study that was thorough and objective. However, I have no confidence that this study will be either thorough or objective. The Governor-elect's spokesperson has indicated that the governor-elect "has made it clear that whatever it takes to fast-track the approval of the project needs to be done." This "by any means necessary" approach to the environment is troubling at a minimum. Placing such a critical environmental decision in the hands of the Bush administration, and a governor-elect who has indicated that he will do whatever it takes to get this project approved, is simply making a mockery of the process.

I have spent considerable time listening to my constituents in district five discuss how to address gridlock. If we want to address gridlock and improve air quality, we should put the following four measures into place:

- Build the Inner Purple Line, the Corridor Cities Transitways, and increase our overall investment in mass transit.
- Identify traffic hot spots throughout the county, and adopt a plan for road improvements and road construction that will provide relief in these hot spots.
- Adopt a comprehensive plan to better manage the underlying growth that is the root cause of the traffic congestion and air quality problems.
- Enact campaign finance reform at a local level so that conversations about critical public policy issues, such as congestion, will occur on a level playing field.
- Encourage and support alternatives to cars and even buses like telecommuting and flexible work hours.

I hope we will be able to make our most pressing problems our priorities. The ICC needs to be put in perspective---behind the budget crisis, behind the education of our children, behind the safety of our residents, and behind the road and transit solutions to gridlock that are near term and within our means.

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