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New Coalition to Fight Plan to Add Toll Lanes to Beltway

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More than 20 civic and neighborhood groups from Montgomery and Prince George's counties announced a new coalition yesterday to fight Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr.'s (R) proposal to widen the Capital Beltway by adding express toll lanes.

Maryland officials are studying adding one lane to each loop of the Beltway. An existing lane on each loop also would be converted to a toll lane, making most of Maryland's section of the highway three

free lanes and two express toll lanes in each direction. Toll fees, rather than taxpayer dollars, would finance the project.

Members of the new opposition group, Citizens Against Beltway Expansion, said they have begun distributing fliers to more than 20,000 homes saying the project would threaten nearby neighborhoods, fail to provide relief from congestion and unfairly favor wealthy motorists.

Instead, they said, Maryland should build an east-west transit link, called the Bi-County Transitway or Purple Line, improve bus

service and make communities more pedestrian-friendly.

"The majority of people would be stuck in the regular travel lanes," Tony Hausner, a coalition member and Silver Spring resident, said at a news conference in the Montgomery County Council office building yesterday. "Those people would be traveling in a gridlock situation."

Montgomery Council President George L. Leventhal (D-At Large) and council member Steven A. Silverman (D-At Large), who is running for county executive, also spoke against widening the Belt-

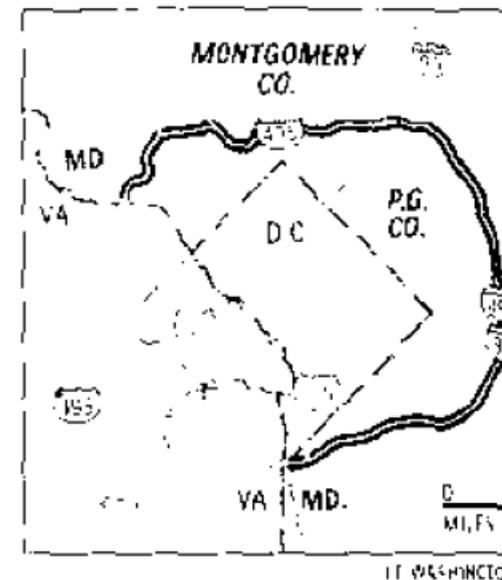
way, which they said would come at the expense of transit projects.

Maryland highway officials said express toll lanes would enable them to add road capacity paid for by motorists seeking alternatives to sitting in traffic. Studies of similar projects in Texas and California have shown that the income levels of motorists using toll lanes were similar to those using regular lanes, the officials said. The studies found that motorists were willing to pay to get someplace quickly.

"The goal here is to be able to develop projects where the user fees pay for them, so we're not di-

verting money away from projects like the Bi-County Transitway," said Neil J. Pedersen, Maryland's highway administrator. "We're really trying to move forward on both at the same time."

Maryland and Virginia are jointly studying express toll lanes for parts of the Beltway near the Woodrow Wilson and American Legion bridges. Virginia has signed a \$900 million deal to build toll lanes that would remain free to carpools on other parts of the Beltway, and is pursuing plans to build them on a 56-mile stretch of Interstates 95 and 395.



Maryland will begin building first express toll lanes on north of Baltimore next week is studying the addition of s lanes to the Beltway and Interstates 95 and 395.