Local leaders to fight ruling on upcounty MARC

by Melissa A. Chadwick
Staff Writer

Less than 24 hours following the public comment period on a state proposal to end MARC train service in Boyds and Dickerson, officials announced the two stations would close in March.

The move comes just five days after more than 150 upcounty residents and elected officials from the county, state and federal governments turned out for a public hearing on the issue and expressed overwhelming opposition to the plan.

Robert L. Flanagan, secretary of the state Department of Transportation, announced Tuesday afternoon that service to four MARC stations in the state would be eliminated beginning March 6.

Residents and officials were alarmed at the speed of the decision-making process.

"It is difficult to believe that with the public comment period closing on Monday that the state would really be considering any of the comments if they announced the closures the next day," said Boyds resident John King Jr., a 45-year MARC rider who has used the Boyds station since 1984. "There is no way they could have given it any kind of intelligent consideration. I am shocked that they would have made a decision this quickly."

In addition to the Boyds and Dickerson stations on the Brunswick line, the Jessup and St. Denis stations on Baltimore's Camden line will also close.

"MARC must put its limited resources where the ridership is," Flanagan said in a statement Tuesday. "These four stations simply don't generate the ridership necessary to justify the investment required to keep them operating and safe. The four stations that will close are all within four miles of another MARC station, providing customers with a very viable commuting option."

The Maryland Transit Administration, an agency of the state transportation department, took the community and local officials by surprise in November when it announced the proposal to close the less-used stations.

County officials, including Councilwoman Nancy M. Floreen (D-At-large) of Garret Park and Councilman Michael J. Knapp (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown, said the state's apparent hasty decision was an unwise move, particularly since it comes just one day before the start of the new legislative session.

"I expect to spend a lot of time in Annapolis on this issue, and the issue of transit funding in general," Knapp said. "Talk about just giving everyone lip-service. We had a hearing just to say we had a hearing. It blows me away."

State Del. Jean B. Cryor (R-Dist. 15) of Potomac said she doesn't consider the matter closed. She hopes to set up a meeting between Flanagan and upcounty commuters to discuss the consequences of closing the stations and the misguided reasons for closure cited by MTA.

MTA targeted the stations due to low ridership numbers. Over the last 12 months, a daily average of 12 people boarded the train at Dickerson and nine at Boyds, MTA officials said.

Commuters who use the Boyds and Dickerson stations will have to use other stations or find alternate modes of transportation.

Commuters argued at Thursday's public hearing that the cost to expand parking to accommodate more riders at the other upcounty stations — Barnesville, Germantown and Point of Rocks — would be more costly than keeping the Boyds and Dickerson stations open. MTA has said that expanding parking at the Germantown station, which will soon be at capacity, is a future priority.

"Meanwhile, there are simple, low-cost actions MTA could take to increase ridership right now, such as arranging with the county to run shuttles from Clarksburg to Boyds, or posting highway signs for the station, or improving rider flexibility through more frequent stops," Boyds resident Miriam Shoenbaum said to a round of applause at the hearing.

Three morning trains, one afternoon train and three evening trains stop in Boyds and Dickerson on the Brunswick run from Martinsburg, W. Va., through Gaithersburg to Washington.

Shoenbaum said Tuesday afternoon that she was "surprised and very disappointed" in Flanagan's decision. She and her husband, who stays home with their 3-year-old daughter, will have to purchase a second vehicle for her to commute to another train station.

The more than 50 residents and government leaders who testified Thursday argued that closing the stations is shortsighted and ill-conceived when exponential growth is expected in nearby Clarksburg.

"That area continues to grow," state Del. Brian J. Feldman (D-Dist. 15) of Potomac said Tuesday. "It doesn't appear to me that the administration has taken into account all the relevant facts. There is an extremely modest savings, if any, when weighed against the human costs and policy implications."

In addition, many pointed out that the county already maintains the stations at no cost to the state. The state's annual operating cost for the Boyds and Dickerson stations is $670 each.

There were no MTA presentations during the hearing, but Glenn Litsinger, the agency's customer service manager, read a statement outlining new costs, including the need for a $300,000 passenger warning system at Dickerson.

Commuters questioned why an existing warning system at Dickerson was removed several years ago.

Local officials balked Thursday, and again Tuesday, at the notion of eliminating transit options in a county where limited progress has been made on two projects that would ease upcounty traffic — the widening of Interstate 270 and the Corridor Cities Transitway.

"Therefore, at this time, the only real transit alternative our residents have is the MARC trains, which have long provided countless county residents with a solution to the crush of traffic that so often clogs our roads, pollutes our air, and generally makes commuting a nightmare," Knapp said. "Given that the state has not invested in the I-270 or the Corridor Cities Transitway, then, it seems counterintuitive to reduce services on the MARC — the one transit alternative that is working."

MTA officials also noted the expense of new ticket machines at the two stations. The machines are part of a broader initiative to standardize transit fare cards in the state.

The MTA system will soon get ticket vending machines at each station at a cost of $116,000 each. The machines will issue Smart Card transit passes, rechargeable fare cards that can be used at all MTA facilities, including bus, subway and light-rail stations. The cards will also be compatible with transit stations operated by the Washington Metropolitan Transit Authority, including the Metro.