



Testimony on Transportation Priorities Letter

January 24, 2023

It is necessary and important to update the county's Transportation Priorities Letter. Our letter needs to be updated in light of experiences of the last three years and take advantage of the openings for progress created by the change of administration.

Unfortunately, neither of the drafts in the packet fully accomplish these goals. The mix of specific spending requests – in practice, the core of the letter – is heavily weighted toward automobile travel. Most of the money would increase highway motor vehicle capacity. This directly undercuts the county's climate, land use, and economic development policies, all of which are based on transit-oriented development and a shift of travel away from automobiles.

Montgomery County needs a balanced transportation system. It does not have one. We have only begun to correct the imbalances created by decades of spending that pursued the overriding goals of moving more automobiles and moving them faster at the expense of safety, efficiency, and livability. The only way to achieve balance is to now prioritize transit and access to transit over highway capacity.

Our specific comments follow.

MARC trains

All-day two-way MARC service should be the county's highest priority for new transportation capacity. Together with the Purple Line, it would create a rapid passenger rail network spanning the county, an economic development asset that no other suburban county in the United States could match.

The two drafts ask merely that MDOT "initiate a planning study" for more MARC service. Another state planning study would be a waste of time. We already know a third track is needed. CSX owns the existing tracks and the right-of-way. The state needs to sit down with CSX, decide together where the first section of added track will go, based on rail operations and ease of construction, negotiate how many more trains MARC will get to run in exchange for the state's investment, and build the track.

We believe the likely site for the first section of third track is the Barnesville Hill, requiring an investment (including new train equipment) in the ballpark of \$100 million. Discussions with CSX are required to confirm this.

MARC expansion has been studied for more than 15 years. It is time for action.

Toll lanes

The case for privatized toll lanes on I-270 and I-495, always weak, is now collapsing. Promises of “traffic relief” turn out to be based on traffic models that lack any credibility. The Hogan administration admitted last year that large government subsidies will be required. The only real purpose of this project is to extract money from the pockets of Maryland drivers and taxpayers.

The language in the Executive’s draft letter is far superior to the language in the Planning Board draft. However, we recommend some clarification. The current P3 agreement is structured to build what yields the maximum toll revenue, regardless of whether it reduces traffic congestion, is equitable, or is environmentally sound. It is thus inconsistent with what the county wants. The letter should explicitly recommend against proceeding with a P3.

Also, the statement in the first paragraph that “nearly all agree that something needs to be done” is subject to misinterpretation. Toll lane proponents in and out of government have falsely suggested that the American Legion Bridge needs to be replaced even if it is not widened. In fact, the bridge is structurally sound and can remain in use for decades to come. It needs repainting in the next few years and in another ten years or so it will need a redecking. We and many other stakeholders believe that improved transit options on the existing bridge would be the best path forward. To avoid misunderstanding, the words “to provide better access to destinations in the corridor” should be inserted at the end of the paragraph.

Bus rapid transit

The BRT section of the letter needs to make clear that bus lanes should be created by repurposing existing pavement, rather than widening highways. The state highways designated for future BRT are already too wide for safe and convenient access to buses. Further widening them would increase the difficulty and danger of reaching the stop, undercutting the rationale for BRT.

The letter also does not fully reflect the knowledge gained from the performance of the US 29 Flash BRT line. Ridership on Flash has been disappointing, even taking account of the drop in bus ridership due to Covid. We have identified two reasons for this.

(1) The bus runs in regular travel lanes where the traffic is most congested. The center-running lane plan for Flash approved last year addresses this. This item should get a higher priority among the BRT projects.

(2) Flash runs in the same corridor with a Metrobus that makes more stops. The buses have different payment systems. If you paid for Flash at the machine at the stop, and then the Metrobus comes next, you would have to pay a second fare when you get on the bus. To avoid the resulting confusion, and also to give Flash the image of being different and better than a regular bus, Flash and Metrobus stop at different stops.

Most US 29 bus riders want to take whichever bus comes first. Given the relatively long intervals between buses, especially outside rush hour, a shorter wait saves time compared to a faster bus. But the separate stops and payment systems force them to choose one or the other in advance. Bus trips now can take more time than before Flash.

Many of the planned BRT lines share this defect. These plans should be paused for revision. Wherever BRT and local buses share the same corridor, local buses should stop at the BRT stops, and both buses should use the same payment system.

Highway expansions

The highway section of the drafts is a major shift away from the 2020 letter. It would represent a return to the anti-transit and anti-pedestrian policies that created the existing transportation mess, policies that the county says it has rejected. It lists six construction projects aimed at easing automobile movement, often at the expense of transit riders and pedestrians, and only one project to improve non-automobile movement (River Road inside the Beltway).

Most egregiously, the highest-priority highway project in the 2020 letter, the transformation of Georgia Avenue in Montgomery Hills and Forest Glen, has been removed entirely. In its place, the draft letters ask MDOT to build a “diverging diamond” interchange for Georgia Avenue and the Beltway.¹ Diverging diamonds do not belong anywhere in Montgomery County, and especially not in an area we are trying to make more walkable.



A diverging diamond interchange

The diverging diamond item should be removed from the letter. The 2020 language about Georgia Avenue transformation should be restored, remaining our highest highway priority. Also, the item about the junction of MD 28 and MD 97 should be clarified by replacing the word “interchange” with “intersection” and changing “prioritize pedestrian and bicycle safety” to “prioritize pedestrian and bicycle safety and ease of movement.”

¹The draft letters incorrectly state that the diverging diamond is recommended by the recently adopted master plan. What the master plan actually recommends for action now is the transformation requested by the 2020 letter. It recommends only that a diverging diamond should be “evaluated” some time in the future, and suggests that better traffic engineering alternatives will exist by the time that evaluation occurs.