

Resolution to Establish the Infrastructure Funding Workgroup

Testimony by Lee R. Keiser, Feb. 25, 2025

Montgomery County Council, Rockville, MD

Good afternoon, President Stewart, Vice President Jawando, and Councilmembers. I am Lee Keiser, a longtime District 1 resident, who was a pre-pandemic leader of our 270-home civic association in a last-mile community. During the pandemic, I was honored to serve as a County Council Senior Fellow, (remotely) based in the Central Office, where I chronicled COVID response and recovery efforts in other large jurisdictions across the U.S.

Further, as a dedicated pedestrian safety advocate, I have testified regularly about a ¾-mile, state road bikeway/sidewalk capital project that's permanently stuck in Final Design Stage. In 2024, it was pushed out beyond the six-year budget cycle. What remains, however, is my enthusiasm for civic engagement and my earlier decades as a public policy professional; that together have piqued my interest in the Council's proposed Infrastructure Funding Workgroup. Thus, I appreciate the chance to testify today.

Naturally, the Workgroup must clearly define the scope of transportation projects: would it be the full universe of Capital Improvement Program (CIP) projects, or only those in a certain planning phase, closest to construction? Outside of the CIP, would the scope extend to, for example, MCDOT's Residential Sidewalk Program where about a dozen sidewalks are funded in a calendar year, but the backlog reportedly numbers over 300? Residents typically do not easily distinguish between CIP and non-CIP infrastructure.

The Workgroup proposal does not support having public members, but would engage public feedback, and require compliance with Open Meetings laws. While that may appear to check the "transparency" box, in my experience, it's lacking in the public's primary capital budget resource – the Capital Budget book – that inconsistently portrays information across CIP projects. Yes, each project page shows a GIS image, justification, some history, and of course the budget trajectory. However, Project Description Forms are written with varying degrees of objectivity, and of historical and community-landmark inclusivity. Why don't they consistently show images with nearby landmarks that are logical destinations for those who walk, roll or bike; such as schools, the library, the Capital Crescent Trail? While most project narratives cite a relevant Master Plan and year, my community's sidewalk/bikeway project official justification statement excludes its origin in the 1990 Bethesda-Chevy Chase Master Plan. It only references the 2018 Bicycle Master Plan. Such inconsistency is something I've testified about regularly.

On April 9, 2024, then-Vice President Stewart asked that Capital transportation projects be broken out by Council District and by Equity Focus Area. In my review of the FY26 budget book, I found a single project, the Cherry Hill Road Bike Facility, whose justification states, “This was a Tier 1 Bicycle Master Plan recommendation, and is located in an Equity Focus Area.” Surely, there are more EFA projects?

The point of these few examples is that the Infrastructure Workgroup could enhance transparency for all residents, far beyond the life of the Workgroup, by performing an audit of the Capital Budget book Transportation chapter, to ensure consistency and comprehensiveness in justifications and visuals, across all projects. While internal-agency Workgroup membership assures that staff has ready access to more comprehensive and timely project documents, the public’s primary infrastructure-budget resource should offer enhanced transparency regardless.

In sum, the glacial pace with which few master-planned transportation projects ever come to fruition erodes public trust for taxpayers. Therefore, this Funding Workgroup is sorely needed. But we should also be mindful of possibly-parallel opportunities to enhance civic engagement around infrastructure projects generally, across all sectors.

Finally, Montgomery Planning’s recommendation to bring in a highly-skilled, transportation-infrastructure facilitator is a wise one, and I heartily support Dr. Glenn Orlin’s self-nomination in this regard. I also stand ready to assist.

Thank you.

Lee R. Keiser