

Montgomery opposes Beltway widening

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Perez: 'Bury that in the graveyard of bad ideas'

by **Steven T. Dennis**

Staff Writer

ANNAPOLIS — While Virginia pushes ahead with a \$900 million deal to add toll lanes to the Capital Beltway, Montgomery County councilmen are opposing the Ehrlich administration's \$3 billion plan to follow suit on the Maryland side of the Potomac.

Virginia signed a deal last week with two private companies to construct four high-occupancy toll (HOT) lanes along 13 miles of the Interstate

495, while Maryland transportation officials are showing off interim results of its study to add two express toll lanes along its 42-mile stretch.

"I don't know any one of my colleagues who has expressed any degree of optimism about Beltway widening," County Council President Thomas E. Perez said. "Quite the contrary. The clear consensus on the council is that this is a bad idea."

Perez said he and his colleagues support adding an HOV or HOT lane from the Interstate 270 spur to the American Legion Bridge, where the

right of way is wider, resulting in less damage to adjacent communities. But widening the rest of the Beltway is not feasible, he said.

"It's just not going to happen from I-270 to New Hampshire Avenue," said Perez (D-Dist. 5) of Takoma Park. "It will relieve congestion for about four days at the expense of billions of dollars. They ought to just bury that in the graveyard of bad ideas."

Plans presented recently as part of a state study of the \$3 billion to \$4 billion widening project show that 40 homes and businesses in Montgomery County could be destroyed. Neighborhood opposition is particularly intense near Georgia Avenue,

where homes abut walls lining highway.

A majority of council members reached by The Gazette echo Perez's comments, including supporters of the \$2.4 billion Intercourse Connector highway, and the council generally prefers building the \$1.2 billion Purple Line transit project.

"I'd rather invest our money in the Purple Line," Perez said. "We know we can get it done and we can get some connectivity all the way from New Carrollton to Bethesda," Perez said.

Montgomery County Executive Douglas M. Duncan (D), meanwhile

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has long endorsed widening the Beltway for an HOV lane, including the project in his Go Montgomery! transportation plan.

Highway advocates, meanwhile, are hoping that Virginia's action will add momentum to Maryland's plans, lest Virginia have a 12-lane highway come to a screeching halt at Maryland's eight-lane road.

"People know that the Beltway is a parking lot and it's only going to get worse over time," Maryland Transportation Secretary Robert L. Flanagan said.



**Perez
Favors
Purple Line**

Flanagan said the department would take into consideration the views of council members and affected communities as well as the broader community before moving forward with the project.

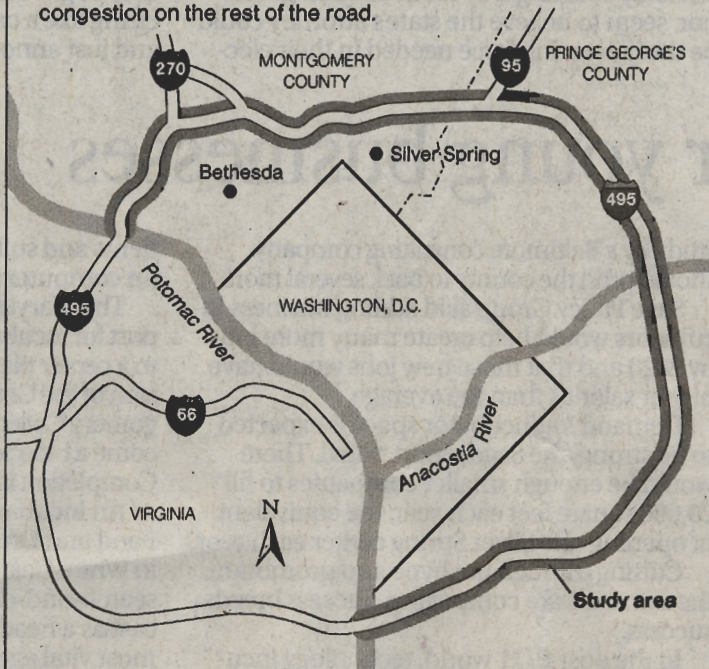
"What our vision is choices for people that would be created by a statewide system of express toll lanes in highly congested corridors, including 270, the beltways, I-95 and Md. 5 coming up from Southern Maryland..." Flanagan said.

"I think that it's important that we continue to improve mobility for Marylanders and to give them options when they travel other than the current option of sitting in long traffic jams."

In addition to opposing a widened Beltway, the county also opposes the administration's plan not to give free trips to high occupancy vehicles. Doing so

Beltway project could affect many

Bethesda and Silver Spring homeowners who live near the Beltway are worried about losing their houses if the State Highway Administration and Maryland Department of Transportation decide on a plan that would add two Beltway toll lanes, one in each direction. The toll lanes would allow drivers to pay to avoid congestion on the rest of the road.



Source: State Highway Administration

Reuben Dalke/The Gazette

would reduce funding needed to build the project, Flanagan said, adding that enforcement would be difficult because there is not enough right of way to separate the toll lanes from the general purpose lanes.

State lawmakers also have expressed concern about the project. Del. William A. Bronrott (D-Dist. 16) of Bethesda, chairman of the Montgomery delegation's Transportation Committee, said he is very skeptical about the project east of I-270.

"Thus far, from everything I've heard from citizens that are getting organized on this issue, I see a brick wall ahead on this proj-

ect," he said. "They are going to have to show not just us, but the people living along that long corridor, how we can justify this."

Now that Virginia has given the green light to a wider Beltway, said John B. Townsend II, a spokesman for AAA, Maryland should follow suit and expedite its study.

"You have a hodgepodge when one state does it and the other doesn't," he said.

AAA came out this week in favor of the toll lanes. Although AAA and other groups have been critical of toll proposals in the past, the reality is that the project could not be funded any other

way, Townsend said.

Maryland originally did not think that tolls could cover the entire cost of the project, Flanagan said, but is studying Virginia's experience closely.

Virginia will not put up any cash for the project in return for giving the private companies a profit from the toll revenue.

Flanagan said Maryland is also looking at the possibility of a public-private partnership in addition to toll-backed bonds.

Timing of the project also is uncertain. The state's study has been ongoing since 1994, and there is the possibility that public hearings will be held this fall or next year.

Flanagan said that the administration would work with the General Assembly on the project, but said it is not clear whether it would come up for a vote before the 2006 elections.

Both expected Democratic candidates for Montgomery County executive, Councilman Steven A. Silverman (D-At large) of Silver Spring and former councilman Isiah Leggett of Burtonsville, also criticized the project.

Silverman said he opposes the widening east of I-270 and wondered whether other options, such as drawing narrower lanes, were a possible alternative. Leggett said he opposes the project because of the homes that it would destroy. He said he is also concerned about the toll concept, which he said could create "Lexus lanes" that regular commuters could not afford.



**Flanagan
Beltway is
'a parking lot'**