

MD 355 Corridor Advisory Committee Meeting #15

February 3, 2022

6:30pm – 8:00pm

Held Virtually via Zoom

CAC members in attendance:

CAC members (marked with an "x" if Present)			
Nancy Abeles	X	Damon Luciano	
Joshua Raymond Arcurio		James Martin	
Peter Benjamin		Jeremy Martin	
Carol Berger		Deborah Michaels	X
Paula Bienefeld		Mark Pace	X
Jay Brinson		Sasha Page	
Dennis Cain		Era Pandya	
Jerry Callstein	X	D. Todd Pearson	
Steven Cohn		Susan Roberts	X
Barbara Moir Condos		David Rosenbaum	X
Elizabeth Crane		Chad Salganik	
Kristi Cruzat		Margaret Schoap	X
Nallathamby Devasahayam		David Sears	
Cherian Eapen		Peter Shaw	
Ryan Emery		Gail Sherman	
Greg Ford		Eric Siegel	
Roger Fox	X	Ana Milena Sobalvarro	
Jerry Garson	X	Gerard Stack	
Matt Gordon		Goke Taiwo	
Peter Henry		Michael Tardif	
Kathie Hulley		Helen Triolo	
Celesta Jurkovich		Zachary Trupp	X
Peter Katz	X	Gary Unterberg	
Sylke Knuppel		Francine Watters	
Arnold Kohn		Ronald Welke	
Anthony Kouneski		Steven Wilcox	
Richard Levine	X	Andrew Williamson	
Todd Lewers		Paul Yanoshik	
John Lin		Joel Yesley	
Richard Lindstrom	X	Damon Luciano	

Stakeholders and members of the public in attendance:

Jesse Cohn McGowan – Montgomery County Planning Department
Peggy Schwartz – North Bethesda Transportation Management District
Tim Goodfellow

Staff in attendance:

MCDOT staff	Consultant team members
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Corey Pitts, MCDOT Division of Transportation Engineering, Planning Section Manager Joana Conklin, MCDOT BRT Program Director Darcy Buckley, MCDOT Sandra Marks, MCDOT Denny Finnerin, MCDOT Consultant Project Manager 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mike Chamberland, Stantec Lori Adgate, Stantec Randy Knapick, IBI Group Andrew Pease, IBI Group

Meeting Introduction, Zoom Instructions & Protocol, and Attendee Introductions

Corey Pitts welcomed all attendees and introduced the meeting by covering the following items:

- The meeting format (via Zoom)
- Instructions for using Zoom
- Meeting protocols for Zoom use
- Introductions of the MCDOT team
- Introductions of the consultant team

Meeting Objectives & Agenda Review

Denny Finnerin provided an overview of the meeting objectives, which include:

- Updating CAC members on the status of the MD 355 Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) project, including the BRT elements of the County Executive's proposed budget.
- Reviewing corridor engineering and design updates since CAC meeting #14 in April 2021.
- Providing CAC members with an opportunity to ask questions and provide feedback.

In addition, Denny provided an overview of the meeting agenda.

Project Update

Denny Finnerin provided an update about the project status and its schedule by covering the following items:

- Overall project purpose
- Overview of MCDOT's FLASH BRT program
- Current status of the project
 - In preliminary engineering phase, approaching 25% design
 - Alternative B Modified – basis of design
 - Modifying segment extents and service plan
- Overall project process, including progress made, work still to come, and general timeline
- Project design segments and their refinements

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- Seven segments, from Segment 1 in the south (Bethesda) to Segment 7 in the north (Germantown & Clarksburg)
- Review of work completed since previous CAC meeting
 - Completed 15% design in July 2021
 - 25% design targeted for April 2022
 - Coordination with Maryland State Highway Administration (MDOT SHA) on free-right-turns, in relation to County Vision Zero objectives
 - Coordination with Montgomery College and Montgomery County Public Schools regarding transit center placement near Montgomery College-Rockville Campus
 - Coordination with City of Gaithersburg regarding Lakeforest area and future development in the vicinity
 - Evaluating details for potential station terminal at Montgomery College-Germantown
 - Coordination with other stakeholders

To conclude this section of the presentation, Denny paused to allow for questions and group discussion:

Q #1:

Participant asked if any existing bus lines would be entering BRT corridor to enable seamless transfers inside the corridor, or would there only be intermodal transfers between existing bus lines and the BRT corridor, which impacts fares, considering whether or not a new fare would have to be paid when connecting to the BRT.

R #1:

The current service design approach is to have multiple BRT patterns that serve different portions of the corridor. The general thinking is that routes entering the corridor from other areas would interface with the BRT at the transit center locations and would require a transfer. The BRT line itself, which is a long corridor, is envisioned as being served by multiple service patterns, with some focused on providing connections to Shady Grove and others focusing on intra-corridor trips between activity centers.

Discussion:

Discussion followed regarding the potential loss of ridership that could potentially occur if riders have to transfer from local bus to the BRT service.

Q #2:

Participant stated that when looking at proposed project cost, if MCDOT could provide free Ride On service for the next 15 years for the same cost as the project, most riders would want free transit. Also mentions that there is a current proposal for high speed transit on I-270, and asks if the work is being done in conjunction with MD 355 BRT for cost savings, or if both projects being done separately and incrementally. Also explains that major delays with Purple Line development are evident, and that rail ridership and use of Metro Station parking lots have dropped dramatically due to COVID. Explains that most people believe that transit use will not go back to what it was prior to COVID, and wonders if this is being factored into the MD 355 BRT plans.

R #2:

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Regarding bus ridership, levels have been relatively steady through the pandemic, and Route 55 ridership has almost returned to pre-COVID ridership levels, which indicates positive ridership trends for MD 355 BRT. Regarding the other studies, MCDOT is coordinating closely with Maryland SHA on I-270 Opportunity Lanes project, with Montgomery County Planning Department on Corridor Forward recommendations, and with Ride On regarding the Ride On Reimagined Study. MCDOT feels strongly that bus ridership will regain pre-COVID levels and that bus riders will continue to do, since MCDOT is trying to provide them with a better choice in traveling across these corridors. That is priority #1.

Discussion:

Participant asked about ridership figures for Routes 46, 55, and 101, which has recently been removed. Is up-to-date data available?

In response, MCDOT stated it is requesting ridership statistics from the Transit Division, which will be shared once it is obtained.

Q #3:

Participant asked about route on Observation Drive to Snowden Farm Parkway, and wonders if this takes into consideration the county's CIP project for the extension of Observation Drive to Little Seneca Parkway, which then connects with Snowden Farm Parkway. Requests clarification. Also wonders about specific turn movements for Segment 7. In addition, states that it would make the most sense to have BRT return south on MD 355 after going north into Clarksburg on Snowden Farm Parkway.

R #3:

Provided explanation of detailed turn movements, and stated that Segment 7 plans do take into consideration the county's CIP project. Explains that the project reviewed several alignment options for Segment 7, and that an alignment on the already-constructed portion of Observation Drive was selected due to slow progress on the potential Observation Drive extension.

Discussion:

MCDOT stated that the extension of Observation Drive is not currently in design. However, if the extension occurs and development in the area expands, the MD 355 BRT corridor could be moved to that location.

Added that Segment 7 is planned to operate in mixed traffic, which would allow greater flexibility in moving the corridor.

Participant asked if this is the decided-upon alignment for Segment 7.

MCDOT responded by stating that yes – that is what MCDOT is moving forward.

Budget Presentation & Focused Discussion

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Corey Pitts explained that in advance of upcoming county council budget meetings, we want to discuss the recommendations in the budget, how those relate to a number of BRT project, and any questions participants may have.

Corey moved on to deliver the budget presentation, which covered the following topics:

- Purpose of the budget discussion.
- Locations of planned BRT capital improvement projects.
- Overview of the Veirs Mill Road BRT, including key features and corridor extents.
- Discussion of MD 355 BRT, including details about key corridor features, the longer-term North and South Phases, and details about the Central Phase.
- Information about ridership projections and key benefits of the Central Phase, and why it and Veirs Mill Road BRT are being approved for funding through construction.
- Anticipated potential funding sources for MD 355 Central BRT and Veirs Mill Road BRT, including federal grants and Maryland Opportunity Lanes funding.
- Overview of the FLASH BRT network that is approved for implementation as a part of MCDOT's FY 2023-28 CIP.

Q #1:

Participant mentioned that data for Routes 55 and 46 are only through February 2020. Explains that WMATA data shows that ridership and parking levels between 6am and 9am at Shady Grove are very low. Bus ridership at Shady Grove is extremely low. Asks if we should wait until after COVID and see how ridership rebounds before moving forward with the BRT project, and in the interim continue to provide free transit.

R #1:

BRT is not only about providing connections to Shady Grove, where ridership is expected to resume to pre-pandemic levels. Based on past disruptive events, travel patterns reemerge to strong, if not stronger, levels. MD 355 BRT is also about providing better service to riders who make trips within the corridor, including helping riders in Germantown and Gaithersburg have better access to jobs and services.

Discussion:

Participant explained that his neighbors formerly commuted to work via Ride On and Metro into Washington, and they do not plan to return to the office. Most people will not rush to get back into the office.

MCDOT responded by explaining that it is starting to return to the office, and we are finding that there is value in meeting in-person and that some things do not work in a virtual environment. We are expecting that the peak period travel pattern will change away from am/pm work commutes to shopping, health care, and services trips. We will see travel patterns reemerge as we come out of the pandemic.

Participant responded by stating that vehicle traffic on 270 and 495 has basically returned to normal, but it is more spread out. Morning commute hours see less traffic, but evening commute hours are as bad as they were prior to the pandemic.

Q #2:

Participant requested information about funding sources for toll lanes and any guarantees that BRT would get that funding.

R #2:

Agreements for dollar amounts and their arrival times are commitments. \$300m and \$600m have been committed, but they do not mention any specific projects. They do mention high priority transit projects, and the state has mentioned the Corridor Forward project as a guide for where the funds would go, which represents the top priority in the county.

Q #3:

Participant discussed Segment 7, stating the Alternative B Modified planned for the alignment on MD 27 and Snowden Farm Parkway since few residents were living along MD 355 between Germantown and Clarksburg in 2018-2019. However, development is quickly expanding in this area, and MD 355 continues to expand while MD 27 does not. The number of residents along MD 355 in that segment that necessitate BRT is beginning to emerge. This makes it seem like BRT is being built for 2020, and not for 2022 and after. The planning and growth occurring warrants changes, and continuous reevaluation is required.

R #3:

MCDOT does plan to revisit underlying ridership assumptions and models that informed the previously-showed results for 2040. Every year or periodically, the regional body updates travel demand models based on land use forecasts and expected changes, which should be captured as we move forward.

BRT Runningway & Lane Repurposing Analysis

Mike Chamberland facilitated the detailed runningway and lane repurposing presentation, starting with an overview of the preliminary design runningway, including the BRT segment configuration, as well as objectives of the lane repurposing analysis. Specifically, Mike covered the following topics in detail:

- An overview of the preliminary design runningway alternatives for each segment across the full corridor.
- Specific runningway alignment details for the southern (Segments 1-3) and northern (Segments 4-7) portions of the corridor.
- A summary of the lane repurposing investigation, with details about the modeled BRT configuration and preliminary investigation results.
- Details about portions of the investigation still underway, including mode shift, average trip delay, and traffic diversion evaluations.

To conclude this section of the presentation, Mike paused to allow for questions and group discussion:

Q #1:

Participant explained that buses with exit doors on both sides, to accommodate curb-running and median-running stations, many seats and capacity are lost.

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R #1:

BRT vehicles are being designed so that exit doors will only be on one side of the bus.

Discussion:

Participant asked how that can be done, and asks what side doors will be on if stations will always be on one side of the bus.

MCDOT responded by confirming the right side, or curbside.

MCDOT Consulting Team added that in a center runningway, the stations would be to the right side of the runningway in a staggered fashion so that space is accommodated in the right-of-way.

MCDOT confirmed that this is in line with current County bus standards.

Q #2:

Participant asked about repurposing study, stating that analysis shows the lane repurposing working in Segment 2. However, Segment 2 suffers from a high level of congestion especially on weekends and seems like an odd location for repurposing. While there may be construction cost savings, congestion will likely remain due to land uses and wonders how this can make sense, considering trip needs in this section. Reducing the number of travel lanes could drive up congestion severely, with travel patterns spread more throughout the day.

R #2:

The positive analysis results for lane repurposing in Segment 2 relates to the intersections that exist in Segment 2, as opposed to intersections in other segments, which are more challenged. Traffic analysis showed that lane repurposing in those areas was more difficult due to the intersection issues, where in Segment 2 intersections are not as problematic.

Discussion:

MCDOT Consulting Team explained that Segment 2 features the greatest decrease in construction costs due to the adding of two median lanes and removal of two existing lanes. This means that the footprint of the roadway in this segment generally stays the same. However, there are still traffic delays during the PM peak period in this section. Mike explains that in Segment 2 overall, while there are cost savings, there are still issues with delay.

MCDOT explained that it is currently not convinced that lane repurposing “works” in Segment 2. There is a lesser degree of impact in Segment 2. That doesn’t mean that the impacts are acceptable, but simply means that the impacts are lower compared with those in other segments. Segment 2 does have the greatest benefit in relation to construction costs, but that is not the driving decision of lane repurposing. The investigation is continuing, and the determinations for each segment are not yet settled.

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Participant responded by explaining that on weekends or during the day for shopping, congestion may always be present, and Rockville Pike with fewer lanes is hard to imagine. There is a vision for what Rockville Pike should look like in Segment 2.

Next Steps & Conclusion

Denny Finnerin concluded the presentation portion of the meeting by explaining the next steps in the process, including upcoming February capital budget and CIP public hearings, as well as plans to complete 25% design by April 2022, facilitate public outreach and open house events in late May 2022, and schedule the next CAC touchpoint in the spring of 2022.

As a follow-up to the presentation portion of the meeting, Denny opened the floor for questions and group discussion:

Q #1:

Participant explained that M-NCPPC has a Boulevard concept for Rockville Pike, where placemaking has more importance and buildings will be closer to the roadway, service roads will be removed, etc. Asks, based on lane repurposing plans for Segment 2, if the Boulevard plan is no longer happening, or if it will happen and the plans for lane repurposing will have to change. Wants information on how the two plans are being coordinated.

R #1:

The project is coordinating regularly with M-NCPPC and that MCDOT is working to ensure that master plan components are integrated into the project as much as possible. Explains that some of that incorporation is dependent upon locations of planned components along the corridor. Regarding the White Flint visioning plan, nothing that MD 355 BRT is proposing would go against that, and plans would compliment that vision. The repurposing study is looking at ways the project can reduce impacts on adjacent properties, including considerations related to development that aligns with visioning plans but has not yet occurred. For example, some businesses still exist with strip mall-type parking in the front, and vision for the future must be balanced with what is on the ground today.

Discussion:

Participant responded by explaining that close to White Flint, there is residential development and recent buildouts. Relieved to know that both plans are being coordinated.

Q #2:

Participant requested clarification about proposals to divert traffic from MD 355 to I-270, and I-270's proposal to diver traffic from I-270 to MD 355.

R #2:

MCDOT provided explanation that the project is not proposing to send traffic to I-270, but we are studying what would happen to MD 355 traffic if the number of travel lanes was reduced. The study is still underway and results are not yet confirmed.

Discussion:

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Participant further explained that coordination between MD 355 and I-270 projects is necessary, since losing lanes on I-270 due to toll and HOV lanes, there is an intention to send more traffic from I-270 to MD 355. Also explains that another problematic intersection is MD 355 and Strathmore, where there are many left turns in the southbound direction. This could cause long queues. Requests confirmation about how this configuration would work.

MCDOT responded by explaining that the concept is being explored, and MCDOT has received numerous comments about whether or not lane repurposing would work. We are exploring if this would work, and since study is only partially completed, we do not yet have results or specific answers about the design. No decisions or agreements have yet been made with MDOT SHA, which owns the roadway. Many people are interested in how to maintain a narrower, more pedestrian-friendly MD 355 while still accommodating BRT.

Q #3:

Participant asked about budgeting in the southern portion of the corridor, where there is a huge amount of development planned and being implemented. Asks if a tax increment coming from the development in that area would be a potential BRT funding option. Mentions that Portland's streetcar was funded in part by new development in a downtown neighborhood, and development close to the streetcar is now responsible for 20 percent of the tax base in Portland. Wonders why MD 355 BRT project is not exploring this, especially for areas between White Flint and Rockville Town Center.

R #3:

There is a taxing district built into White Flint, which is meant to fund a number of transportation improvements in that area. Since development has been slow to materialize, those funding sources have not come in. Therefore, the County has been forced to front funding for transportation improvements being implemented there, such as roadway improvements currently under construction. Alternative funding source proposals are being investigated by other departments within the county. Once we have solid proposals, we can discuss them in more depth.

Q #4:

Participant asked if the project is relying on dated travel patterns for modeling purposes, with travel patterns using Rockville Pike purposefully for all-day peak trips. There seems to be a disconnect between the amount of traffic in Segment 2 as compared with Segment 1. In addition, Richard asks about funding from the I-270 Opportunity Lanes Project, which is controversial for funding and speculative at this time. The project cannot rely on funding from the Opportunity Lanes Project.

R #4:

MCDOT stated that these are great points and they are received.