

"Federation Corner" column
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Update on State transportation projects

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Approximately 90 percent of the funding for transportation in Montgomery County comes from the state and federal government and the remainder from the County. During the 2013 General Assembly session, the state gasoline tax was increased for the first time since 1992. Since the gasoline tax had not been increased in over 20 years, the state had no funds to build new infrastructure and was hard pressed to maintain what had already been built. Many of us have noticed the deterioration of our roads.

With the funding increase, Governor Martin O'Malley has announced the following projects for Montgomery County:

- \$280 million to complete right-of-way acquisition and final design for the Purple Line. An additional \$400 million will be provided for construction of the \$2.2 billion Purple Line project with the remainder to be paid for with a combination of federal grants, state and local financial contributions, and private investment.
- \$100 million to complete right-of-way acquisition and final design for the Corridor Cities Transitway.
- \$85 million in operating assistance for the County's Ride-On Bus (FY 2014-2019).
- \$125 million to construct a new interchange along I-270 at Watkins Mill Road.
- \$25 million to build a relocated MD 97 around Brookeville.
- \$7 million in design funds to build two interchanges along U.S. 29, at Musgrove Road and Fairland Road, to replace existing intersections.
- \$3 million in design funds to widen MD 124 from Mid-County Highway to south of Airpark Road.
- \$3 million in planning funds for the MD 28 / MD 198 Corridor Transportation Improvement Study.

The Governor announced that the State will deliver the Purple Line through a public-private partnership (P3), the State's first such transit project. The General Assembly over the last several years passed legislation on use of P3 for state projects. Using a P3 to build and operate the Purple line will speed its construction and is expected to produce lower construction and operating costs for the state than would be the case if it were operated by WMATA or the government.

In June and July, the Planning Board held four work sessions on the Staff Draft of a Countywide Transit Corridors Functional Master Plan. After a number of modifications, the Planning Board Draft was sent to the County Council. The Council will hold public hearings on the Plan on September 24 and 26 beginning at 7:30 p.m.

As with any Master Plan, approval by the Council does not necessarily mean anything will be built. Rather, it just allows implementation agencies to propose study/build actions and the Council to consider and act on them. Thus, there will be many future opportunities to address specifics in the design effort and funding requests.

The following information was included in Planning Board Chairman's transmittal letter to the Council: *"This Plan provides enhanced opportunities for travel by transit to support Montgomery County's economic development and mobility goals in an environmentally sustainable way, and in a way that preserves our existing communities. As a Functional Master Plan, it makes no changes to current planned land use or zoning, but recommends changes and additions to the transportation network that are needed to serve the County's most densely developed areas, areas planned for redevelopment, and areas planned for new dense development. These recommendations include:*

- *Transit facilities along ten corridors to facilitate Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) service that will move more people to and from jobs, homes, shopping, and entertainment areas in urbanizing parts of the County, while making more efficient use of our public rights of-way and existing pavement.*
- *Pedestrian facilities that meet ADA Best Practices and provide safe and adequate accommodation along and across the recommended transit corridors, ensuring that transit patrons can safely cross to and from transit stops and that the general public can safely cross these roadways at all intersections.*
- *Accommodating all master plan bikeways within the recommended rights-of-way and accommodating additional on-road bike facilities where possible.*
- *Designating more than two dozen Bicycle-Pedestrian Priority Areas around major transit stations, several of which are included in the County's initial round of proposed bikeshare stations.*
- *A third track on the MARC Brunswick Line between the Frederick County line and the Metropolitan Grove station to reduce conflicts with freight service and enable the expansion of commuter service, as recommended by the Maryland Transit Administration's Growth and Investment Plan.*

"BRT has the ability to greatly expand the people-moving capacity of a travel lane, either all day or during peak periods, and can be a highly effective way to decrease dependence on single-occupant vehicles and the resultant congestion on our roads. The Plan provides the flexibility to make modifications to the recommended type of transit treatment in specific corridors or segments, while achieving an overall network that is consistent with the minimum level of service that would be provided by the recommended transit corridor treatments in this Plan. Toward that end, an important implementation step after adoption of the Plan will be creating minimum performance standards to guide the detailed planning and engineering efforts to ensure that the proposed BRT network will be an attractive alternative to driving."

There has been some concern raised about the right-of-way (ROW) proposed in the Master Plan for the BRT and its effect on existing neighborhoods. For each of the 10 corridors, Appendix 11 of the Plan contains recommendations for the minimum ROW for different sections that are needed to support the typical lane configuration, and Appendix C identifies the existing ROW. In 74 of the 97 segments, the proposed ROW is the same as the existing. For the other 24 segments, the average increase is six feet.

The idea behind the BRT is to avoid "major impacts on existing development, such as requiring the removal of buildings, slope impacts within ten feet of buildings, or eliminating off-street parking for residential properties." Such impacts would be cost prohibitive. The actual amount of land needed will not be determined until detailed studies are undertaken, and that cannot happen until the Council approves the Master Plan and corridors and then approves funding for the studies. The earliest that could happen is next spring.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800 to 1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to montgomerycivic@yahoo.com