

"Federation Corner" column
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Correcting misconceptions about bus rapid transit plan

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A number of statements made during the County Council's September 24 and 26 public hearings on the Countywide Transit Corridors Functional Master Plan (CTCFMP) reflected misunderstandings of what is in the plan. Some of the misunderstandings and the facts related to them follow. Unless otherwise noted, the information provided is from the CTCFMP, with much of it coming from Planning Department staff.

There were a number of comments that Appendix 11 would require the taking of large amounts of land for a right-of-way (ROW) as wide as 185 feet. Appendix 11 shows the typical sections that were used to determine ROW needs. Both constrained and preferred dimensions ROWs are shown. While the higher values for the preferred dimensions are more desirable, most of the county ROWs are constrained, so those are the values the planning staff most often used. The plan does not recommend acquiring additional ROW to achieve the preferred values. The resulting ROW needed is what was shown in the plan. In 74 of the 97 segments, the proposed ROW is the same as the existing ROW and requires no additional taking of land. For the other 24 segments, the average additional amount of taking to achieve the needed ROW is six feet.

The CTCFMP Appendix identifies where additional ROW is recommended beyond what is already shown in county master plans. A figure of 3,000+ properties was quoted as being impacted but the staff has not yet completed that analysis. Even when land will be taken it doesn't necessarily mean that a building will be demolished or an owner no longer able to use his property.

It was stated that medians would be removed, but that is not proposed by the CTCFMP in any location. It recommended all medians be retained. Where medians are now less than six feet wide, the CTCFMP recommended they be widened to at least six feet to achieve the space needed to construct pedestrian refuges. At non-intersection and non-station locations, trees would be provided where possible. Trees are included along the roadside in all the typical sections developed for this plan.

The December 2012 study by the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP) was cited as saying that MD355 was the only viable corridor and that was based on an unprecedented 100% increase over existing bus ridership. While the citation is true, by ITDP's staff's own admission they were only looking at existing ridership and what was reasonable to expect in the near-term. They did no modeling to determine a true forecast ridership, nor were they looking at conditions and demand in 2040, which is what the CTCFMP did. That report also states that while US29 doesn't have the ridership characteristics of BRT as they define it, dedicated lanes would be useful to avoid congestion delays.

Several statements were made about BRT service potentially disadvantaging local bus service. MCDOT is currently undertaking a study of how BRT service and local bus service would best interact. While the results of that study are still forthcoming, the space for dedicated lanes in the CTCFMP would make it easier to provide better service for local bus as well as BRT. Where curb lanes are the selected treatment, both BRT and local bus patrons would benefit. Where a median busway is selected, the ability to accommodate both BRT and local bus service in the median would have to be investigated.

Many comments were made about taxing property owners on or near the transit corridors. The CTCFMP makes no determination of cost nor a recommendation on financing. The Transit Task Force Report estimated the cost of the entire 160 mile network at \$1.8B. This value includes the CCT which is a state

responsibility. Since the Master Plan is for 80 miles, that would mean the ballpark for the CTCFMP is less than \$900M and that includes maintenance facilities and BRT vehicles, which can cost \$1.1M each. Some people were saying \$10B to \$18B for what is in the CTCFMP.

There were also statements about a proposal to tax properties within half a mile of the BRT lines. The Transit Task Force report provided 10 different funding alternatives but made no recommendation or prioritization. A number of the alternatives were developed to provide answers to “what-if” questions and provided them for educational purposes, even if they were unrealistic. Five of the alternatives did include taxing properties within half a mile of the BRT corridors to cover capital costs. The half-mile distance applied only to non-residential (commercial and office) properties. It is interesting that citizens are objecting to taxing non-residential properties.

Statements were made that repurposing lanes for BRT use only would reduce roadway capacity. The opposite is true since the decision to repurpose lanes was made only where forecast BRT ridership was greater than the number of people who would otherwise be using a lane of general traffic.

Statements were made that repurposing lanes on MD 355 for curb BRT lanes would cause backups that would prompt some drivers to take detours through Chevy Chase West. The recommendation for lane repurposing was made based on ridership forecasts that showed that BRT would move more people in the transit lane than could be moved in general purpose lanes. Therefore, traffic could actually be reduced in the remaining lanes. Because there is not a through north-south parallel route through Chevy Chase West, and residents have correctly testified that they live in what is essentially a cul-de-sac with no access to the west, diverted traffic is not expected to be a major problem.

Statements were made that the plan is premature and that we should build the two busways in current area master plans first. Project planning has already begun on the Georgia Avenue and Veirs Mill Road BRT studies, so those two projects are moving along. Rather than being too early, since each of the corridors will likely be broken down into segments to be studied in greater detail, and because it takes several years to go through the planning and design processes that are needed to determine construction costs, this is the appropriate time to begin more detailed planning on a comprehensive transit network. The cost of such a large network is something that will likely have to be paid for over many years so it needs to be scheduled well in advance.

There were several comments expressing concern about segments that were recommended as mixed traffic and a desire that dedicated lanes be provided. The CTCFMP provides the flexibility to change the treatment on these segments and corridors based on further study.

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