

“Federation Corner” column  
*The Montgomery Sentinel*, 18 June 2015

## **Time to say ‘No’ once again**

By Paula Bienenfeld

Well, this was an easy column to write. The County Executive re-constituted the Transit Task Force, and this Wednesday, June 17<sup>th</sup>, a public hearing on the Independent Transit Authority was held. Again. So, it was tempting to merely reprint what I had written the first time, in January, when this ITA was stealth-introduced by Mr. Leggett. And, here we are again. The ITA language has not changed from what we see online. And neither has the position of the Civic Federation. We oppose the creation of an Independent Transit Authority.

We note, however, that even though the residents of the county oppose this and we are being told it is under discussion, the county already has a website page, identified on my computer tab as ‘Independent Transit Authority – Montgomery County.’ So, yes, you are already paying for an ITA, at least in web design labor hours. And, the presence of the web page on the public government website suggests that this is a done deal. The Transit Task Force, the public hearings, the Community Advisory Committees, all are window dressing for something that has already happened.

Still, it’s fun to slice and dice. So, here we go, with a reading of Mr. Leggett’s PowerPoint slide presentation of January 2015, titled, ‘Proposal for Montgomery County Transit Authority.’

But first a quick definition: Orwellian. What is that? According to Wikipedia, the definition of Orwellian is: “an adjective describing the situation, idea, or societal condition that George Orwell identified as being destructive to the welfare of a free and open society. It denotes an attitude and a brutal policy of draconian control by propaganda, surveillance, misinformation, denial of truth, and manipulation of the past...”

And now on to the slide presentation. The first few slides purport to tell us why we must have an ITA. Why?

First, “County needs greater authority to self-determine its future” This statement is the very definition of Orwellian. What Mr. Leggett and the County Council are saying is that the residents can better self-determine our future if we have our rights taken away from us and given to a 5-member independent group of people who will have no oversight by the residents, the voters, or the taxpayers. No one believes this.

Second, “Economic growth of the County (jobs and property tax base) depends on availability of transit (GSSC, White Flint, White Oak, Chevy Chase Lakes Master Plans).” The only way this is going to be true is if our property taxes are raised, as is being planned. An increase of 15-30% that has been suggested and will be required to build out and operate a \$5-7 billion fixed-route diesel bus system. A system that does not have the ridership numbers to support it; has no flexibility as is required in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; does not take into account any developments in autonomous cars; smart streets; independent transit systems such as Bridj; a system that will use diesel buses; and will require taking private property from homeowners and small businesses.

Third “Need an agency with a single focus and mission to develop, maintain and operate this vital infrastructure” We have that agency, it is the County Department of Transportation, which we are already paying for and is wholly under the purview of Mr. Leggett. If that agency is not capable of maintaining and operating our county infrastructure, Mr. Leggett can easily change its management and its operations so that it does. In a government that operates as if it is responsible to its residents, that is what happens. Clearly there is a disconnect here.

Fourth, “Need an agency that is more nimble administratively to build the proposed Rapid Transit System (RTS)” Again, we have such an agency, we have the Department of Transportation. As state residents we also are already paying for the State Department of Transportation and State Highway Administration. In addition, the same proposal states that one of the very first things the ITA will do is hire a General Manager and staff. So, again Orwellian, the statement that the way to be ‘more nimble’ is to create another county bureaucracy. In fact this would make a great drinking game. Have a swallow every time Orwellian language is used. Just make sure you have a designated driver at the end of the evening. And, it is hard to believe there could be a nimbleness about an agency that refuses to admit there is such a thing as V2V, autonomous vehicles, and any number of radical changes that will be introduced to our streets in the next few years that will transform absolutely the way we get around. This no-nothing approach is not nimble.

And, let’s look a little more closely into what the ITA would do. The Transit Authority would be a five-member body appointed by the County Executive with the power to create a special taxing district to finance the cost of county transit functions, and impose a certain special tax. So, the bill would allow the county to create a special taxing district, outside of our Charter and outside of public control.

One of the purposes of the ITA is to ignore our Charter tax limits, which were voted on by a public referendum. Provisions of the Montgomery County Charter will not apply to the Transit Authority except under certain circumstances; providing that a certain tax limitation does not apply to certain revenue raised for certain purposes...”

Transit functions would be moved to the proposed Transit Authority, including the Ride-On Bus system and employees, and likely the Silver Spring Transit Center.

And of course, the Transit Authority would have the power to take property. For the Bus “Rapid” Transit, that could be completed by using the ‘Quick Take,’ rather than ‘Eminent Domain.’

In sum, the powers that would be given to the people appointed to the proposed Transit Authority include the power to raise taxes without limit and with essentially no oversight, and the power to take your property and that of your neighbors with no oversight.

So to our elected officials we say: No. Drop the ITA idea. It’s over.

A change.org petition that you can sign to oppose the bill was set up in January, and it is still live, at [https://www.change.org/p/shane-robinson-stop-the-mc-24-15-tax-and-spend-power-grab-now?utm\\_campaign=fb\\_dialog&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_source=signature\\_receipt&post\\_id=1414068630\\_10203999617816807#](https://www.change.org/p/shane-robinson-stop-the-mc-24-15-tax-and-spend-power-grab-now?utm_campaign=fb_dialog&utm_medium=email&utm_source=signature_receipt&post_id=1414068630_10203999617816807#) = . Please sign it. Make noise.