

Purple Line Informational Meeting: A Synopsis of Residents' Comments

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At 7:00 P.M. on June 22, 2009 at the Chevy Chase Town Hall, Mayor Kathy Strom welcomed residents, her fellow elected town officials, and guests to a meeting about the proposed Purple Line. She explained the purposes of the meeting were to share information, to hear and respond to questions; and to listen to residents' comments. Mayor Strom introduced the facilitator for the evening, Philip Favero, who assisted those in attendance in developing ground rules, which stressed the value of civility. Three Town of Chevy Chase officials – Councilperson Patricia Burda, Mayor Strom, and Councilperson David Lublin – followed by presenting information about the town in relation to the Purple Line: Burda about the town's actions to date; Strom about specific legal issues the town has raised vis-à-vis the Draft Environmental Impact Statement; and Lublin about upcoming State of Maryland and Federal Government schedules. The presentations were followed by fifteen minutes of questions by residents, as was a second presentation by Burda, in which she identified options for the town to move forward with regards to the Purple Line. Town staff electronically recorded all presentations, questions and answers, and residents' comments.

Residents' Comments

Beginning at 8:30 P.M. and for the hour that followed, Chevy Chase Residents provided comments in response to the following query: "In your opinion, what should the Town of Chevy Chase now do about the Purple Line?" Nineteen residents identified themselves by name and address and spoke their opinions.

The speakers urged town officials to take various positions and offered reasons for their recommendations.¹ Five salient recommendations emerged:

1. Stop taking further action
2. Shift strategies from legal to political
3. Combine political and legal strategies
4. Oppose light rail but have a contingency Plan
5. Prepare to sue

Residents' Recommendations and Reasons Explained

The five recommendations and reasons offered to support them follow:

¹ Comments by 19 residents do not constitute a scientific representation of opinions held by town residents. Not only is the sample too small, but more importantly, the residents were self-selected on a non-random basis. The nineteen speakers constitute a set of residents who had sufficient time and interest to participate in the meeting and who had formed opinions and were willing to express them in a public forum. Because the 19 comments do not provide a representative sample, the number of residents who made any given recommendation is not included in this synopsis.

Stop taking any further action

Residents who urged the town to stop taking further action about the Purple Line said, in essence, that the town has made its case, but the dye is cast. The Purple Line will be built, they said, because it is needed and because influential private interests and authorities at the county, state, and federal levels all strongly support the light-rail option. Building a political coalition has not been easy, a resident said, because most people outside the town support the Purple Line. Another speaker thanked town officials for questioning the rail option, said the town's concerns may have improved the state's plan, but urged that now was the time to back off. Residents recommending the town stop any action were particularly sensitive to accusations that the town's opposition to the line might be seen as "Not in My Back Yard" (NIMBY) opposition and viewed as obstructionist. The town must consider the greater good for the region, said one person, and bear the sacrifices as well as enjoy the benefits of living here. Some of those urging the town to stop taking action also mentioned their opposition to additional significant expenditures of town funds. One person noted, further, that while building the Light Rail will change the experience of the Capital Crescent Trail, it will also extend it.

Shift strategies from legal to political

Several residents urged the town shift its prime strategy from legal to political – because of the cost to the town for attorneys' fees but also because a political approach is, in their opinion, more likely to succeed. One person said the legal opposition was like "spitting in the wind" and would, at best only produce delay. It is a political issue, he said, and organized opposition could, potentially, gain the support of people who routinely drive through the town. Another speaker said she opposed funding litigation when the town is divided on the issue, but also said she could support hiring, temporarily, two town staff persons to facilitate the creation of a Political Action Committee. Another person suggested hiring lobbyists rather than pursuing legal action.

Combine political and legal strategies

Residents who suggested the town combine political and legal strategies noted the political nature of the state's decision making re the Purple Line, but said a legal strategy was called for as well. Common, among these speakers, was the opinion that strong opposition to the light-rail option was needed. Fight on, said one person, building alliances with similarly-minded groups, and resort to lawsuits, if necessary. Another person said that political action is a good idea, but that filing a lawsuit should not be ruled out. The state is not being candid with citizens in regards its plans for the Purple Line, she said, and should be challenged in all ways possible.

Oppose light rail but have a contingency plan

A few residents opposed the light rail option for the Purple Line, preferred rapid-bus transit, but said the town should also consider contingencies in case light rail is built. One person said if the State of Maryland decides to build light rail, the town should fight for

property owners along the trail to provide safeguards from trains and noise protection. Another speaker said that if light rail is built, it should be routed underground.

Prepare to sue

Several speakers strongly endorsed legal opposition to the light-rail option for the Purple Line. One said the current plan is “impervious to logic” and raises many engineering, environmental, and planning questions; the court can make the State of Maryland go back to the beginning phase and do it right, he said. Another speaker said that, based on the quality of the town’s argument, a lawsuit could force delay and improve the plan by taking into consideration the town’s objections. Delay is a worthy goal, suggested another person, and the town should do everything in its powers to keep the Capital Crescent Trail as it is. Another resident said it is not true that opposition to a Light Rail Purple Line is a NIMBY cause, noting that, in her estimate, 60% of people who have signed a petition in opposition to the light rail option live outside of the Town of Chevy Chase. She also added that opponents to light rail living in the Town of Chevy Chase should remember that other groups, having the same interests, do not have the public revenue resources that the town has at its disposal. Light-rail transit on the Purple Line is a “retrograde idea,” she said, because of safety problems it would create for town children and others. Finally, a person who had done calculations of the capital costs of transit systems relative to new riders gained, based on data contained in Draft Environmental Impact Statements for several systems, said the Light Rail Purple Line proposal was relatively “highly inefficient” and would be seen as such if legal action forced the State to disclose data on projected costs and ridership.

Conclusion

The meeting adjourned at 9:30 P.M. with an announcement by Mayor Strom. She reminded participants that the town will convene a public hearing on the Purple Line on July 22 at 7:00 P.M. At that time residents will be able to comment on the record to the Council about what the community’s next steps, if any, should be regarding the Purple Line.