

For Immediate Release
August 4, 2009

Contact: Patricia Burda
301-652-4841

Town of Chevy Chase Questions Governor's Costly Purple Line Transit Choice

The Town of Chevy Chase today joined a dozen community organizations representing about 15,000 households to decry Governor Martin O'Malley's decision to promote light rail on the Capital Crescent Trail as his preferred alignment for the Purple Line.

"We are extremely concerned that the Governor is promoting this costly and questionable alternative," said Town of Chevy Chase Mayor Kathy Strom. "There are so many problems with his choice, especially the cost to taxpayers. How many other important transit projects and other critical programs and services in the state will have to be shelved if this alternative proceeds?"

This rail option choice is estimated to cost over \$1 billion more than bus rapid transit. Even if this more expensive alternative receives federal funding, the state of Maryland must match the federal allocation. Warren Deschenaux, the legislature's chief budget advisor, predicts a \$2 billion deficit by FY 2011. "The present course of state finances is plainly unsustainable," he wrote to General Assembly leaders in July.

Maryland will need to raise the gas tax by a quarter in order to pay for its share of the proposed new transit lines along with the proposed Corridor Cities Transitway, and Montgomery County has yet to explain how it will raise the over \$100 million needed to pay for the county's share. At the same time, state revenues have slid faster than projected with the state having to cut transit spending on MARC not to mention basic services like schools.

Also, it is disappointing that the Governor would make this choice at a time when bus rapid transit is the transportation mode recommended for every other important transit project in the area: the Corridor Cities Transitway; a Montgomery County-wide system proposed by Councilmember Marc Elrich; and a regional system recommended by Metropolitan Council of Government's Transportation Planning Board. In addition, a light rail Purple Line would be an isolated mode—with a unique set of capital and maintenance costs, not part of any other system.

A former transit executive, Roger Mitchell, stated at a recent Town forum that based on the state's current numbers, light rail Purple Line will cost approximately \$139,000 per new transit rider—an extremely high and inefficient use of scarce and badly needed transit dollars.

"While we wholeheartedly support mass transit and believe an east-west line is a worthy project, we feel the region needs more than just a Purple Line," notes Patricia Burda, a Town councilmember. "In particular, the light rail route won't serve the 4,000 new trips per day expected when Walter Reed moves to Bethesda's National Naval Medical Center in 2011." Improving anticipated traffic gridlock on surrounding roads, apart from a light rail Purple Line, is estimated to cost another \$250 million. So far, we've heard about only \$35 million allocated for stopgap measures and the potential of road widening and home condemnation. We need a real transit solution."

The Town has submitted formal comments on the state’s Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) citing legal and accuracy problems with the State’s analysis. One area of concern is the analysis of the low-cost bus rapid transit alternative using Jones Bridge Road at the western terminus. This is the only alternative that would directly serve the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) mandated relocation.

“The state has a legal obligation through the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) process to optimize every alternative. One example of its failure to accurately and fairly assess options is the report’s incredible claim that the speed of a streamlined bus rapid transit system would be slower than that of the current bus system along this route. Anyone can see there is a fatal flaw in that analysis,” notes Sam Schwartz, national transportation expert whose firm, Sam Schwartz Engineering, was hired by the Town to help analyze the State’s studies.

The Town has requested a supplemental DEIS calling for a reassessment of that alternative. The Town has also made numerous attempts to see the how the state derived its ridership estimates, but the state refuses to reveal how those numbers were determined.

If the Governor’s preferred rail alternative for the Purple Line moves ahead, he will, in essence, destroy an important link in the Capital Crescent Trail, the most popular Trail in Maryland with more than a million users a year. The narrowness of the 66-foot right of way into Bethesda will require clear cutting more than 17 acres of mature trees. In addition, the proposed location of a new trail is positioned within 7-10 feet of two trains running at 35 to 50 mph every 3-6 minutes.

During the DEIS public comment period, more than 1,200 people and over a dozen communities wrote in or testified that light rail on the Trail is unacceptable. In addition, more than 18,000 signers of the Save the Trail petition let the Governor know they question the safety and viability of running light rail next to a multi-use trail.

Town of Chevy Chase elected officials have not yet made a decision on the Town’s next steps. “We are interested in whether the Final Environmental Impact Study addresses any of the concerns we raised in our public comments,” stated Mayor Strom. “It is clear from the public hearings and the public record from the state that many residents throughout the region are not ready to just hand the Trail over to a transit line.”

* * * * *