

Recent Press on Transportation for Maryland



Government

Plan is for less 'highway to nowhere'

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Daily Record Business Writer
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Baltimore City and the state are planning to knock down a portion of the Route 40 “highway to nowhere” in West Baltimore as part of a plan to create more parking for commuter train passengers in the area.

The Maryland Transit Administration has gotten \$3 million in federal stimulus money to demolish a portion of a ramp between Payson Street and Pulaski streets, which will clear the way for a new parking lot for riders on the West Baltimore MARC Train station. The state also plans to spend about half of a \$13 million federal earmark for the MARC system to create the parking lot.

Ultimately, the city, which owns the land, is likely to seek a developer for the property, said Deputy Transportation Director Jamie Kendrick. He said the development would probably not happen for a few years, and it’s too early to say what type of property could go there. The station is the focus of a transit-oriented development plan that the city and state have been working on in the community.

The demolition, scheduled to begin in the spring, will clear two blocks worth of abutments that were originally planned to support a highway bridge, but are now an impediment set up between two high speed lanes of traffic that end abruptly at Pulaski Street. The highway section was built in the late 1970s, and was intended to connect Interstate 70 with Interstates 83 and 95, but was aborted amid fierce community opposition.

The highway abutment, composed of gray, wood grain-textured concrete, stands more than a story high and still divides the neighborhood, from which about 700 homes were purchased and razed to create the project. Payson Street, which has been cut off by the highway, will be reconnected after the project is done.

John Hailey Sr., president of the Midtown Edmondson Improvement Association, said he thinks the neighborhood will be better off without the barrier.

“Look at what we’ve got,” he said, gesturing toward the structure. “You’re talking about concrete and steel. We’re talking about the Berlin Wall that divides our community.”

Regional transportation advocates, standing on a raised section of the highway structure Monday, used the highway as a way to illustrate their vision for a better state and federal transportation policy. The Central Maryland Transportation Alliance, the Citizens Planning and Housing Authority, 1000 Friends of Maryland and the Baltimore Regional Initiative Developing Genuine Equality (BRIDGE) announced that they had formed a new group, Transportation for Maryland.

Dru Schmidt-Perkins, executive director of 1000 Friends of Maryland, an environmental group, said the area can be an example of transit-oriented development, where it was formerly an example of highway development that fit poorly with the surrounding neighborhood.

She pointed to a report by the group Smart Growth America, which showed that Maryland had spent 94 percent of its transportation money from a federal stimulus package on maintaining the existing transportation system, while the national average was 63 percent.

“Our current system was already underfunded, and has millions and millions of [dollars in] backlog on repair,” she said. “We shouldn’t be building more projects if we can’t maintain what we have.”

The city and state have big plans for the area around the MARC station, which serves the Penn Line. That line travels between Washington, D.C., and Harford County, and the state hopes many people will use the train to commute to jobs that come along with the military base realignment and closure process that’s expected to bring tens of thousands of positions to Aberdeen Proving Ground and Fort Meade.

In addition, the planned Red Line transit link between Woodlawn and Southeast Baltimore is expected to travel along Route 40, and the plan for the line backed by the city would run the line along the highway to nowhere, and would stop at the West Baltimore station. Kendrick said the city is planning other improvements to make the area more pedestrian-friendly.

Monday, June 29, 2009, 2:00pm EDT

Advocates: Maryland stimulus projects score high marks but mass transit shortchanged

Baltimore Business Journal - by Daniel J. Sernovitz Staff

Maryland transportation planners have done well focusing federal stimulus money on the state's aging infrastructure, earmarking 94 percent of that money to repair aging roads and highways and putting people back to work.

But better roads and more capacity aren't the only answer, and Maryland's state and congressional leaders need to put more emphasis on — and more money toward — building communities and improved transit options going forward, transportation advocates said Monday.

“Transportation, in and of itself, should not be seen by itself,” Otis Rolley, CEO of the **Central Maryland Transportation Alliance**, said at a press conference Monday at what's been called the “Highway to Nowhere” in West Baltimore.

Maryland has committed \$210 million of its share of federal stimulus funds for system preservation — fixing up highways and roads that have fallen into disrepair, according to a Smart Growth America report on the state's use of American Recovery and Reinvestment Act spending. That's encouraging, transportation advocates said, but state and federal legislators need to refocus their efforts on transit and community-building as Congress seeks to reauthorize the federal transportation bill released in draft form earlier this month. It's that bill that determines how the state doles out its federal dollars for transportation projects.

“If done right, this reauthorization bill could open the door to a transportation process that creates transportation choices, local jobs, and a healthier economy,” Rolley said.

Members of the **Maryland Transportation Coalition**, which includes Rolley's group, want to see much more emphasis placed on the role transportation options like the proposed Red Line in Baltimore City will have in the communities they're located.

To reinforce its message, the group held its press conference on the so-called “Highway to Nowhere” along Route 40 in West Baltimore as cars whizzed past, tractor trailers buzzed by and ambulance sirens' wailed. Speakers' voices were often drowned out as they reflected on the stub of highway, envisioned decades ago as a way to connect Interstates 70 and 83 through downtown Baltimore. The section of concrete and steel, the only portion of the connector route built in Baltimore, is set to be torn down with \$3 million in stimulus funding.

In its place, the transportation advocates envision reconnecting the neighborhoods north and south of Route 40, creating more parking for the West Baltimore MARC station nearby, and eventually stimulating a much larger transit-oriented development to replace what some neighbors call a Berlin Wall in West Baltimore.

“We’re standing here at the site of a tremendous transportation injustice,” coalition member Dan Pontious, executive director of the **Citizens Planning and Housing Association**, said at the news conference. “This site showcases how federal transportation funds can be used not just to improve our transportation system, but to improve our communities.”

The federal transportation bill, SAFETEA-LU, maps out how the federal transportation department directs money toward state transportation projects. That system has been skewed heavily toward new roads and highways, to the exclusion of new transit options, said Dru Schmidt-Perkins, executive director of **1000 Friends of Maryland**. That’s emphasized in how the federal government has allocated money from the \$787 billion federal stimulus money.

To qualify, the projects had to be shovel-ready, or far enough along to put out for bids. None of Maryland’s transit projects were at that stage, including the Red Line, and were therefore left out of the stimulus. She encouraged state leaders to move those projects ahead as quickly as possible so they might be eligible for funding if another stimulus bill is approved. She also hopes the reauthorized transportation bill will ensure state’s get more money for transit projects than they have in the past and will encourage Maryland’s leaders to think about those options as part of their larger transportation budgets.

“The decisions we make today will determine the transportation legacy we leave our children,” Schmidt-Perkins said.

Md. gets pat on back for stimulus spending

State praised for using millions on highway maintenance projects

By Michael Dresser

June 30, 2009

Environmental groups and smart growth advocates Monday applauded Maryland's use of almost \$225 million in federal stimulus funds, saying the state's decision to concentrate spending on highway maintenance projects is a wise use of resources and an effective way to create jobs.

Maryland was one of 10 states and the District of Columbia that elected to spend 100 percent of the money they put toward road projects on preserving existing infrastructure rather than adding new capacity, according to a report issued by Smart Growth America.

"Maryland did great. They were one of the best states in the country," said Will Schroeer, policy director of the national advocacy group. The group found that nationally, states have been spending roughly two-thirds of their stimulus funds on system maintenance - an amount they decried as a "lost opportunity" to do more.

Conservative critics saw the issue differently.

"If you're not going to use the funds to increase capacity or immediately decrease congestion, to me it's a waste of money," said Christopher Summers, president of the Maryland Public Policy Institute.

Local supporters of Smart Growth America held a news conference in West Baltimore Monday to praise Maryland's accomplishments and to gently chide it over a few "quibbles."

Dru Schmidt-Perkins, executive director of 1,000 Friends of Maryland, praised the O'Malley administration's focus on fixing existing highways and bridges.

"We should be doing that first before building new capacity," she said. "It just is more job intensive. It has more people at work."

Shortly after President Obama won passage of his landmark economic stimulus bill in February, Maryland became the first state to break ground on a project financed by the bill - a road maintenance job in Montgomery County.

Schroeer said such projects generally take less time to get going than new road construction or widening projects.

"In the current economic situation, the faster job is the better job," he said.

Schroeer said he knows of several large construction projects in other states where money has not yet begun to flow and could be tied up for some time. He added that road construction projects could devote a large percentage of funds to purposes such as land acquisition, which would not create as many jobs as a maintenance project.

Such a focus is also consistent with Smart Growth America's objective of targeting development around existing infrastructure.

Erin Henson, a spokeswoman for the Maryland Department of Transportation, said the state is pleased to receive recognition for its efforts. She said Gov. Martin O'Malley wanted the state to focus on smaller projects to get work under way quickly in all parts of Maryland. Some 19 projects worth \$43 million are under way and the state has given contractors the green light to begin work on another 62 jobs worth \$155 million, Henson said.

"Distributing it to smaller projects allowed the benefit of stimulus dollars to be felt by workers and families in every region of the state," she said.

Schmidt-Perkins said the only "quibble" was that the state could have spent more of its discretionary money on mass transit. But Henson noted that Maryland is spending \$135 million on transit projects from a separate pool of stimulus money.

But Summers, whose libertarian-leaning policy institute is skeptical about the stimulus program to begin with, said investments in mass transit ignore the fact that most Marylanders use roads to get where they need to go. "The road infrastructure hasn't kept up," he said.

Monday, June 29, 2009

New group scrutinizes stimulus spending, transportation priorities

Coalition seeks unified voice on transit, road and planning issues

by Sean R. Sedam | Staff Writer

Maryland needs to get on track with investing stimulus dollars for transportation, a newly formed coalition of smart growth, business, environmental and faith groups said Monday.

The group, Transportation for Maryland, released a report analyzing how states have spent the federal aid in the first four months.

Transportation for Maryland is a member of the national coalition of Smart Growth America, which released the report through its state partners on the 120th day since the passage of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

The local organization's members include 1000 Friends of Maryland, the Central Maryland Transportation Alliance, the Maryland League of Conservation Voters and the Greater Baltimore Committee.

Transportation for Maryland members praised the state for investing 94 percent of the more than \$431 million in transportation stimulus funds it received in preserving its existing highway system.

Maryland spent most of its money on repairs and maintenance "and didn't fall into the trap of new capacity," said Dru Schmidt-Perkins, executive director of 1000 Friends of Maryland.

The national average for investing in existing highways was 63 percent.

"But the stimulus spending also shows flaws in how we plan for and prioritize our transportation projects," Schmidt-Perkins said.

Many major new projects could not be funded using stimulus dollars, because they were not "shovel ready." That included transit projects such as the Purple Line connecting Bethesda to New Carrollton, the Red Line in Baltimore and the expansion of MARC commuter train service and intersection improvements needed under the military's Base Realignment and Closure plan.

Schmidt-Perkins called on Maryland to "seek transformative dollars and jump-start these critical projects."

That includes competing for grants included in the stimulus bill.

One pot of grant money is for high-speed rail and could be used to improve Amtrak, which Schmidt-Perkins called "a stunning resource of the East Coast that has been underfunded and under-maintained and has not been used as it could be."

Maryland's congressional delegation would have to partner with those of other East Coast states to compete with other regions for the funds. The money would provide a more long-term funding stream than the baseline stimulus dollars, which expire in June 2011.

Another pot of grants is available for discretionary programs and could be used for projects like MARC upgrades and transit-oriented development, Schmidt Perkins said.

Transportation for Maryland plans to go beyond the stimulus package to also examine how the state fits into federal transportation policy. The group is pushing for better planning under the reauthorization of the six-year federal transportation plan later this year.

The diverse coalition is seeking to speak with one voice on issues that each group has worked on independently in the past, Schmidt-Perkins said.

"It makes the decision-makers' job much clearer on what their constituents want and how to achieve it, most importantly," she said.

The fix-it approach

Our view: Spending to maintain roads is wise but can't be the whole picture

July 6, Editorial

When homeowners remodel, the temptation is always great to purchase something shiny and new, whether that's a bigger closet, a new bath or a backyard swimming pool. But the better choice is usually to invest first where it counts - in making sure the basic foundation and infrastructure will last. Without leak-free windows or sound plumbing, the rest is immaterial.

That's essentially the reasoning behind Maryland's decision to direct transportation stimulus funds primarily into maintaining the existing transportation system rather than expanding upon it. It also helped that the state's strategy meets the "shovel ready" requirements of stimulus spending that's put hundreds of people to work.

Last week, environmental groups and advocates of smart growth hailed Maryland's approach as one of the best in the nation for spending 94 percent of its eligible highway funds on system preservation, compared to the national average of slightly under two-thirds.

Critics immediately pounced on the strategy as wasteful because, some apparently concluded, anything that doesn't relieve existing traffic congestion is an extravagance. But resurfacing roads, upgrading controls, installing traffic barriers and similar projects can not only help keep cars and trucks moving; they are also critical for preventing accidents and keeping insurance costs down.

A recent national study found that road-related conditions - ranging from potholes to bad design (too-narrow shoulders or a lack of pavement markings are prime examples) - were a factor in 22,000 fatalities and cost the public about \$217.5 billion each year.

Maryland's \$225 million in highway stimulus spending can't fix all the problems. Road maintenance needs easily surpass that figure, and the recession has already caused the state to cut back on transportation spending by more than \$1 billion over the next six years.

Some have also complained that Maryland isn't spending enough stimulus dollars on transit. But that, too, is short-sighted. Building Baltimore's proposed Red Line alone will cost more than \$1 billion, and its design and construction must be approached judiciously or it's likely to be flawed (witness Baltimore's first light rail effort) and lose public support.

Wasteful spending isn't the biggest problem in transportation, it's the lack of money to finance projects of any kind. The Obama administration wants to delay the matter for the next 18 months with stop-gap solutions, and in Maryland, Gov. Martin O'Malley has yet to come up with a good

way to finance the state's future transportation needs - and probably won't until after the 2010 election.

So while it's great that Maryland's transportation caretakers are investing in a better proverbial roof over our heads today, the next improvement projects can't be put off too long. The longer such maintenance is deferred, the bigger the bills in the end.

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