



## Montgomery County Group

November 17, 2010

Dear Transportation Planning Board,

We are extremely concerned with the TPB's plan to vote on a proposal that includes \$3.4 billion road widening for I270 and U.S. 15 while neglecting alternative transit options. This proposal disregards current fiscal realities as well as 21<sup>st</sup> century environmental sustainability needs.

We believe that transit alternatives, including MARC's expansion and possible extensions of Metro, as well as light rail and/or bus rapid transit options, will move far more people at less cost. We particularly urge the TPB to prioritize the proposed expansion of MARC. For about the same price as the road widening, which would affect only parts of Montgomery and Frederick counties, the entire MARC system could be expanded. This would greatly facilitate movement throughout the Maryland suburbs of DC, and in Baltimore. For instance, the Washington Post reported that only \$719 million would be needed to add rails between Baltimore and Washington that would allow MARC to become a full-time transit link between the cities.

While road expansion has repeatedly only induced more traffic and sprawl, transit projects create true dense development. This, in turn, encourages walkable, mixed-use development and reduces the utter car dependency our current infrastructure encourages. The costs to citizens in number of vehicles owned and increased traffic accidents, to government in infrastructure needs, to human health through local pollution, to the local environment through fragmentation and run off, and to the global environment through greenhouse gases, all need to be taken into account.

The Sierra Club and ACT had previously asked for a full appraisal of transit options before moving ahead with road widening, but our request was ignored. We wish that the TPB would undertake a true cost-benefit analysis and would provide full opportunity for public input.

Sincerely,

David Hauck, Chair  
Montgomery County Sierra Club Executive Committee

The **Action Committee for Transit** objects vigorously to the proposed CLRP allocation of \$3.4 billion to widening I-270 and US 15 north of Shady Grove. This is a grievously mistaken policy decision. Furthermore, the TPB is making this bad decision with an utter lack of transparency. As best we can determine, the proposal represents a \$3.4 billion increase in the amount previously allocated to this project in the CLRP. But the incomplete and confusing documentation of this plan issued by the TPB leaves the public without the information necessary to evaluate the proposal.

It is inexcusable to make such a vast investment with such an utter lack of openness. Missing from the proposal are:

- A public announcement of this item.
- A project description. The \$3.4 billion cost is stated only once in the voluminous documentation posted on COG's website, buried in a list of project changes.
- Inclusion of this project in the list of regional significant projects, even though its cost exceeds every listed project except Dulles rail.
- A listing of the cost of each project in the CLRP.
- An explanation of where MDOT found the money in its tight budget.

What's more, spending more than three billion dollars on widening I-270 is a terrible idea: It's a waste of money, because widening I-270 will not reduce congestion. When I-270 was widened south of Shady Grove, the new lanes quickly filled up and the road was soon just as congested as before – except with many more cars.

1. It erroneously assumes that transportation cannot be improved without highway widening. MDOT has never analyzed an all-transit alternative for this corridor, although it was instructed to do so by the TPB 13 years ago.
2. It uses money that would be better used for transit. The proposed \$3.4 billion for highway widening would fund the first three phases of the MARC Growth and Investment Plan, plus the final phase of the plan for the Brunswick Line. The MARC Growth and Investment Plan is not currently funded in the CLRP.
3. It precludes extension of the Metro Red Line to Germantown by removing the existing right of way along I-270 in which the extension could be built most cost-effectively.

Our organization has worked for many years to include alternatives to the failed policy of highway widening in the planning process for the I-270/US 15 corridor. This work included, in 1997, prompting the TPB to reject a Major Investment Study and to insist that an all-transit alternative must be analyzed. But the State Highway Administration's response was compliance on paper only. The SHA's so-called "transit" alternative was to add both general-purpose and HOV lanes to I-270, for a total highway width of 14 lanes in places.

In 2009, we proposed a specific all-transit alternative at a cost comparable to the I-270 widening. This won wide support from the public and from Montgomery County legislators. Yet **SHA is still refusing to consider real alternatives to its highway widening policy.**

Proposing to spend \$3.4 billion on highway widening is particularly unwise at a time when the public favors investing in transit over roads by a 2-1 margin [*see attachment*] and traditional sources of transportation revenue are drying up. In its last session, the Maryland legislature created a Blue Ribbon Commission on Transportation to search for new sources of transportation revenue. *Will the public support new taxes for transportation, if the money will be spent on the highway projects the public opposes?*

We urge the TPB not to include or even consider construction funding for I-270 widening in the CLRP until a true all-transit alternative for the corridor has been fully evaluated.

Ben Ross, President, Action Committee for Transit, P.O. Box 7074, Silver Spring MD 20907

The State Highway Administration has been studying plans to widen I-270 north of Shady Grove for many years. By 1997, work was well underway. But the Action Committee for Transit and the Sierra Club objected to the SHA's plans, arguing that a transit alternative was needed in the study.

**In 1997, the Transportation Planning Board of the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments rejected SHA's plans for an I-270 study and told the state agency that it had to include a transit alternative.** ACT's September 1998 newsletter gives the details. SHA responded by promising to add an Alternative 5 consisting of the Corridor Cities Transitway plus HOV-only lanes on I-270. ACT objected to this, since HOV lanes are roads and not transit. But the Alternative 5 that was actually studied wasn't even a real HOV alternative. It added numerous general-purpose lanes in addition to the HOV lanes. Between Shady Grove and Watkins Mill Road, the highway would be 14 lanes wide. In the area just north of Shady Grove, there were six new lanes of regular traffic. One existing northbound lane - a lane that SHA had opened to all cars after promising HOV when the project was approved - would be converted to HOV.

Montgomery County's Transportation Policy Report of 2001 tested a scenario much like today's I-270 transit vision. Traffic modeling showed transit ridership was huge, with the Metro extension alone showing more ridership than the current eastern Red Line outside Silver Spring. The expanded MARC service also showed very high ridership. Yet SHA persisted in its highway-first approach. Under the Ehrlich administration, the study added two new scenarios with toll lanes, but still no all-transit scenario.

***Today the Obama Administration is seeking to transform national transportation policy, resulting in a level playing field for transit project reviews, and substantially more money for commuter rail and transit.*** Studying and planning for a comprehensive transit system alternative would position Maryland to win funding for this expanded transit system.

## **Washington Post Poll Shows 2-1 Majority Favor Transit Over Roads**

The public overwhelmingly favors a massive reversal of current transportation priorities, today's Washington Post transportation poll shows. **62% of Metro area residents said that efforts to reduce traffic congestion should focus on trains, buses, and other public transportation. Only 30% said the focus should be on building and expanding roads.**

**The priority that area residents favor by a majority of more than two to one differs drastically from current spending patterns.** The cost of highway expansions now being built in the area, including the Intercounty Connector, the Virginia Beltway toll lanes, Montrose Parkway, and numerous lesser road widenings, dwarfs investments in transit. The only major transit project currently under construction is the Metro Silver Line to Tysons Corner and Dulles Airport.

Further evidence of public support for transit came from the Post's question about the current Metro budget crisis. By a majority of 52% to 40%, residents said that Metro should get new funding sources -- even if it meant raising taxes -- rather than cut service. The poll did not ask about raising taxes to pay for new roads, but voters in recent years have strongly resisted new taxes to pay for highways.

The poll also showed continuing high levels of public satisfaction with Metro, despite the system's recent spate of accidents and maintenance-related slowdowns. 80% of regular Metrorail riders, and 70% of the public as a whole, rated the system as good or excellent. The most commonly cited major reason for not using Metrorail was that jobs are located too far from stations. Metrobus and county bus services also got high approval levels from riders, but non-riders gave the bus systems much lower ratings.

"This poll demonstrates once again that the public is way ahead of our political leaders", commented Action Committee for Transit president Ben Ross. "A massive shift in spending from roads to transit is long overdue."

The Post poll covered residents of Loudoun, Fairfax, Montgomery, and Prince George's counties as well as the District of Columbia and inner Virginia suburbs.