



Unfinished business

By: [Joe Nathanson](#) July 23, 2015

Incomplete.

If one were to assign a grade to the decision by Gov. Larry Hogan and Maryland Transportation Secretary Pete Rahn to eliminate the Red Line from Baltimore's public transit future, "Incomplete" would have to be it.

It was no surprise that further work on the Red Line was halted. From the time that the last ballots of the 2014 gubernatorial election were tallied it was clear that the Red Line was on the "endangered species list." During the election campaign candidate Hogan had cited the Red Line and suburban Washington's Purple Line as "too expensive" for the state at this time.

The Red Line did have its problems, as various critics made clear in the past dozen years as the initial draft designs for the east-west transit facility transformed into engineering drawings. But to make the assertion, "The current proposal makes no sense whatsoever to anyone," is ill-informed.

The Red Line began as a concept in the 2002 Regional Rail Plan. The proposed line made sense in that the blue ribbon committee that prepared the rail plan recognized that Baltimore's rail transit facilities had been developed in fits and starts. The results were the separate Metro subway, the north-south light rail line and the MARC commuter train, each a different technology, rarely connecting and not operating in anything that could be called a "system." The Red Line would begin to knit those separate strands together.

The Red Line would have made sense by expanding opportunities, overcoming some of the barriers between disadvantaged communities and the larger region highlighted in the recent report of the Opportunities Collaborative. Major employment centers were connected by the proposed service, from the Social Security Administration headquarters and the Centers for Medicare and Medicare Services on the west, through Baltimore's Central Business District, Harbor East and on to the Johns Hopkins Bayview Medical Center at its eastern terminus. With the Red Line, someone living in West Baltimore could also more reasonably access job opportunities along the light rail corridor extending north to Hunt Valley.

And, the Red Line made sense by offering the potential for expanded economic development in Baltimore, a stated goal of Gov. Hogan. There were various opportunities for transit-oriented development along the proposed line. I remember participating in a meeting in the conference room of the Baltimore Development Corporation in 2005 poring over a map of the intersection of the Red Line with the West Baltimore MARC station and pondering how the repurposed “Ice House” might contribute to the vitality of nearby neighborhoods.

But the line was expensive. I was among those who wondered about the need for an extensive new tunnel through the downtown and extending to Harbor East, Fells Point and the beginning of Canton. There was an already existing tunnel, running under Baltimore Street, constructed at substantial expense to accommodate the Metro built in the late 1970s. The new Red Line tunnel was cited by Secretary Rahn as the project’s “fatal flaw.”

Doing better

In announcing his Red Line decision on June 25, Gov. Hogan stated “we can do better.” He should have continued, saying “we will do better” and announcing that he would have his transportation secretary appoint a task force to meet with Baltimore’s planning and development officials to come up with an acceptable alternative.

This task force, operating without the likelihood of future federal funds, might explore various alternatives to provide a cost-effective, east-west connection across Baltimore City and into western Baltimore County.

For example, the city has a recently completed report calling for a \$27 million overhaul of the Lexington Market, involving serious reconstruction. What if the task force were to examine the creation of a transit hub at the market, linking up the western portion of the Red Line with the Metro’s Lexington Market station?

Continuing eastward on the Metro, another infrastructure investment worth revisiting is the short extension of the Metro north of its existing Johns Hopkins Hospital terminus. This would allow for a connection to the MARC line just north of the Johns Hopkins Bioscience Park. Commuters from the northeastern portions of the region would have ready access to the Hopkins hospital and research complexes as well as the downtown.

These are just a sampling of ideas that various parties interested in seeing a more robust Baltimore regional transit system have been recommending for further consideration.

After completing a geography lesson reminding them that Baltimore City is indeed a part of Maryland, the governor and his transportation secretary need to get on with their homework.

Glib statements about a “boondoggle” have to be replaced by substantive comments indicating a viable way forward for the region’s transit system.

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