



Joe Nathanson: Tunnel vision in Baltimore

By: [Joe Nathanson](#) February 18, 2016

The Maryland Department of Transportation has recently been hosting a series of meetings in various locations in west Baltimore. At issue is the need to rebuild or replace an aging railroad tunnel that now runs under the streets of the neighborhood.

But this is no ordinary, local neighborhood issue. The decisions that flow from these meetings will have ripple effects up and down the Northeast Corridor, from Boston to Washington and points beyond.

Separately, back in January, I attended a public meeting at the University of Baltimore organized by the Federal Railroad Administration. The topic was billed as “NEC Future,” using shorthand for the Northeast Corridor. The FRA meeting and those held by MDOT are, of course, inextricably linked.

The Baltimore and Potomac (B&P) Tunnel, which opened in 1873, is in a dangerous state of disrepair. Still, the 1.4-mile tunnel accommodates daily 155 intercity and commuter trains, along with two Norfolk Southern freight trains. And anyone who has traveled as an Amtrak passenger or a MARC commuter would be familiar with the sharp bend required upon leaving Penn Station heading west, a curvature that requires the trains to move no more than 30 miles per hour through that stretch.

So, the B&P Tunnel is viewed as part of “the Baltimore Bottleneck” from the perspective of the NEC Future planners who are hoping to achieve speeds of up to 170 mph while traveling through the corridor. To relieve this chokepoint condition west of Penn Station and to replace a tunnel with crumbling masonry, the planners are looking at several alternatives for a new tunnel (really, a set of tunnels) that arc further north into Reservoir Hill and provide for an easier curvature to negotiate.

Residents’ concerns

According to a colleague who attended one of the MDOT meetings at Frederick Douglass High School, most of those in attendance were Reservoir Hill residents. Their concerns are easy to understand. They fear that vibrations from trains moving through the tunnels will damage their homes and that the train operations will pollute the local air. They worry that required ventilation towers, rising up to 30 feet above grade, will preempt gardens and other green space as well as be seen as out of scale with the surrounding residential structures. And, they are mindful of a freight train accident and its

impact on the neighborhood, calling to mind the deadly incident that occurred in a Quebec town a few years ago.

Countering those arguments, the planners note that the tunnels are intended primarily for passenger trains. The engineering scheme involving four tunnels and three ventilation towers is designed to reduce the chance of an accident and to deal with it safely, using the latest regulations and standards. The ventilation structures will be situated on vacant land and will not be taller than other buildings in the neighborhood, according to the planners. The vents can be designed to blend in with the surroundings, employing creative design features, such as murals.

Emissions from the vent structures will have to meet state and federal air quality standards. There are no oil tank trains going through the B&P tunnel now. In the future, the number will be a small percentage of total trains using the tunnel. Container cargo trains from the port do not carry hazardous material. By time the tunnels are built, new and safer federal standards for oil tank cars will be in place. The number of houses feeling vibrations or damage from tunnels should be low, say the proponents. If the tunneling is through bedrock, vibrations should be extremely low.

Economic potential

As you might imagine, burrowing through bedrock is an expensive proposition. The various alternatives for a new tunnel set, accommodating four tracks, cost in the range of \$4 billion. For supporters of the new tunnel, the Reservoir Hill neighborhood impacts are seen as “minimal and manageable.”

The larger picture requires consideration of the impacts on the Baltimore regional economy. The proposed tunnel construction is needed to retain Baltimore as a major node along the Northeast Corridor. There is also the potential, finally, to use the new tunnel to provide for double-stack cargo trains from the Port of Baltimore. The advantage of a 50-foot deep channel in Baltimore’s harbor will be wasted if double-stack trains out of the port are not accommodated.

The Reservoir Hill neighborhood has every right to be concerned about potential negative impacts and should insist on working with the engineers to provide for realistic mitigation measures, as may be required. But, in the end, the neighborhood and other Baltimore residents should support the B&P Tunnel project because of the potential for economic development and jobs for Baltimore area residents.

According to Jason Lodge, one of the consultants working with MDOT on the project, coming up with a resolution of this matter, known as a “record of decision,” will be the responsibility of the head of the Federal Railroad Administration. Most likely, that will mean a new FRA administrator appointed by our next president will be making that decision sometime in the middle of 2017.

Joe Nathanson heads Urban Information Associates, Inc., a Baltimore-based economic and community development consulting firm. He writes a monthly column for The Daily Record and can be contacted at urbaninfo@comcast.net.