

# Public Transit Planning and Priorities in Baltimore City and its Region

By James S. Leanos

The decision of the Hogan Administration to abort the Red Line as planned is disappointing for many, but not for a large number of people in Baltimore City and the region. Our greatest disappointment is that Baltimore City and its region have had such a poor, fragmented transportation planning mechanism, that its output (as evidenced by the Red Line) in the absence of plans and executive action for the transportation system as an entirety, are vulnerable to what appears to be a hostile act by the Governor. However, the Governor's decision is a logical executive action when the entire region's needs are accounted for, taking into account his political support.

Baltimore City's municipal government has not, in recent years, embraced public transit, except to the extent the city seeks and obtains project funds from the Federal Government and the State of Maryland while providing a minimum of "skin in the game" for such projects. For most city officials and leadership, public transit is MTA's responsibility alone. And, equally important, the city, region and state have conceived transportation issues in an array of silos, rather than accounting for all of the existing assets together as parts of a whole--road, rail (passenger & freight), rolling stock (buses & railcars), rights of way (local and regional/state roads), and control and communications mechanisms. The result is that the public transit constituency is seen by the majority as a disconnected subgroup within the greater transportation community. It is in competition for resources rather than the beneficiary of a shared view of all transportation resources and needs as a whole.

An example of the City's placement of public transit in its peripheral vision is the comparison of the status and focus on bike lanes and bus lanes. As a direct responsibility of the city's Transportation Department, bike lanes are being actively developed throughout the City. Bus Lanes have not been adopted by the Transportation Department, or even identified as a co-beneficiary of bike lanes. Bike lanes are an important addition to the city. Bus lanes should be as well. More about this will be discussed later, and is discussed in the Transit Choices brochure, Quick Hits (see [www.transitchoices.org](http://www.transitchoices.org)).

Let's step back and consider the assets that we have, and think about how we can use those assets more effectively. When we do this, we may come to recognize that Governor Hogan's action to abort the Red Line may have provided a necessary shock for Baltimore to do things better in using available transportation assets as a basis for system improvements. The Red Line became Baltimore's panacea ("transformational"), if gauged by the attention it received by government, politicians, community leaders, and the news media. It certainly would have disappointed in that context because of the limits of its footprint in relation to the City and region as a whole. It failed to "connect" to two of our legacy rail lines, Light Rail and

Metro, as well as those two lines currently connect to one another. It introduced another free-standing system, technology, equipment and maintenance regime to the whole in a time of limited resources. In short, the Red Line became a project that defined hyperbole without making an investment in our legacy systems.

Let's look at existing rights of way, road and rail, our vascular system. Because in most cases, they cannot be widened, except with massive disruption and investment, we must consider how to move more people and goods more efficiently on the roads and rails that we have before we begin new projects. We must give substantially more attention to our legacy systems and infrastructure. The Transit Choices publication, Quick Hits, provides a solid start towards making transit service an excellent choice in Baltimore City and beyond within the MTA service area. Buses carry many people in each vehicle, yet they have little priority in the existing traffic management system, a city responsibility. Management of the roadways is at the core of reasons the performance of the bus system is so poor and it must be addressed in a manner having equal weight with route planning itself, whether it be local or state roads.

Transportation Demand Management must also be a part of the road planning and operations discipline, to manage single occupancy vehicle traffic more effectively, in a manner integrated with public transit and freight movement, during peak and non-peak hours. Implementation of this would also largely be a city responsibility.

We have five legacy rail systems which carry passenger rail cars: Light Rail, Metro, AMTRAK, MARC Penn Line, and MARC CSX Line. We also have several existing freight rail lines which have, for decades, been identified as obsolete and dangerous: The CSX Howard Street Tunnel, The CSX 26<sup>th</sup> Street alignment, and the AMTRAK right of way (including its tunnels) through Baltimore City which also serve Norfolk Southern. It's a mystery, and a major oversight why these lines are not re-envisioned and discussed more prominently and frequently as needing replacement, improvement and planning funds, and why the political and business interests of our City and State have lacked plans which, within a clear, near-term time frame propose a re-use of the existing rights of way, while collaborating to initiate new alignments for the existing freight and passenger networks now operated by CSX and AMTRAK/Norfolk Southern.

Baltimore City's Planning Department, together with the Baltimore Metropolitan Council's coordination and oversight, must take the lead to make clear plans in these areas so that our political and business leadership can campaign for project funding and implementation by the freight railroads. The benefit of this effort would have far-reaching effects that would dwarf the touted benefits of the Red Line in terms of economic development and job access. And, with a clear program set forth, AMTRAK, CSX and Norfolk Southern would see a city, region, and state ready to provide a clear path for their investments. As a parallel operation, MDOT's MARC system could also more aggressively work to build dedicated tracks for the MARC trains, a necessary component for a frequent, speedy and reliable regional rail system within the Baltimore-Washington corridor and beyond. Current improvements to the MARC

lines are at or near capacity with commuters, but they are insufficient to support 24/7 access and true Transit Oriented Development and the compact growth and lifestyle changes that such projects would bring to the city and our region.

Job access being the primary goal to provide employment opportunities, improvements to and expansion of our legacy light rail, metro and MARC systems clearly would provide access to such areas as BWI, Ft. Meade/NSA, Columbia, metropolitan Washington, Dundalk Marine Terminal, Sparrows Point, and other points along the I-95 corridor southwest and northeast of Baltimore City where much of our economic growth has occurred. As we improve our bus system, improvements to legacy passenger rail systems would offer greater job access as a complement to the bus system improvements.

Why are we dreaming of Maglev (a most expensive system in every way) when our needs could be far better, more quickly and less expensively satisfied with a conventional commuter rail system connected to bus lines at each existing and new station within our region? Bluntly speaking, Maglev is a distraction and a diversion from the job at hand. Our neighbors to the north and south, Philadelphia, New Jersey, New York, and Washington, DC, have long led the campaign for High Speed Rail. We should support their leadership and help to fund studies and design solutions needed in Baltimore City and our region. Anyone who has ridden high speed rail where it exists in Europe and Asia knows that compared with what we have in the USA, it's a marvel, it's heavily used, it's safe, affordable, and it uses well-tested technologies. Rather than a solution, MAGLEV is a direct competitor to both commuter rail and High Speed Rail funding in our region and in the northeast corridor. It's wasting our time and, potentially, our scarce funds. FORGET MAGLEV! GET TO WORK WITH COMMUTER AND HIGH SPEED RAIL!

Among the planning proposals for road improvements in Baltimore City is the demolition of I-83 south of Biddle Street. Bringing the elevated roadway to ground is touted as a way to connect Downtown Baltimore with the near-east areas, making redevelopment of those areas more desirable, while increasing congestion along the I-83 corridor and President Street. The raised expressway would be replaced with a wide surface boulevard, similar to Martin Luther King Boulevard on the west side. MLK Boulevard is not something to be proud of--traffic on it is quite subject to congestion and delay, and its maintenance leaves much to be desired. A better, more cost effective project would be the demolition and relocation of the Baltimore City Jail, Maryland Penitentiary and the Supermax facilities. In many cities, including Baltimore as evidenced by the farmer's market, land is put to more active use under expressways. Many cities have even created useable retail space beneath expressways. We should demolish and relocate the jail, penitentiary and Supermax. This would do much to connect Downtown to the near east. Only then can we see to what extent I-83 in its current form is the problem. Removing the prisons would eliminate a dreadful dead hand from our Downtown, likely provide land for the consolidation of transit routes to east and northeast

Baltimore, and offer redevelopment which could bridge the gulf between Downtown and the near east.

Among our legacies is the Baltimore Rail Plan. Many bemoan the fact that we haven't acted on it since the building of the Metro and the Light Rail lines. Plans are not static and population grows and declines in many parts of the region. If job access is our principal goal, our legacy light rail and Metro systems, having already benefitted from substantial investment, and having ample capacity to spare, are natural bases for expansion westward, northward, southward, and southeastward. Westward, the Metro could be extended from Mondawmin to Social Security and beyond. Northward, either Light Rail or Metro could extend along Charles Street or other routes and eventually to Towson. Southward, Light Rail could extend towards Columbia and Annapolis from BWI. And, Southeastward, Metro could extend mostly at- or above-grade towards Dundalk and Sparrows Point via a new junction south of Johns Hopkins Hospital, providing a needed *high speed* route with minimal tunneling. Or, Light Rail could also extend southeastward from Penn Station via a surface line through Highlandtown and Greektown towards Dundalk and Sparrows Point. The original rail plan is beset with obsolescence and a review and update is long overdue.

Baltimore is still using its first generation rolling stock for its Metro and light rail lines. While serviceable, both will soon be due for replacement. This is an opportunity to review the existing and future routes of Metro and light rail, address fare card updates, station improvements and land-use zoning near existing stations to enhance ridership.

Governor Hogan's decision to abort the Red Line, in the absence of other "shovel ready" programs for Baltimore City to which State funds could be applied, is a basis of much of the anger now sounding out in public forums. The City's needs are many. State and Federal funding constraints, as well as Federal project funding silos requiring identified funding mechanisms before distinct projects can be envisioned, is certainly a contributor to the lack of alternative "shovel ready" projects. This issue was evidently not fully considered as important during the process of planning and engineering the Red Line, nor is it apparent that the Governor actively sought to redirect the funds to Baltimore City projects. However, the absence of other project planning is emerging now as a very important opportunity cost of the Red Line. To avoid this in the future, the City and Region must be more forthright in developing and publicizing an action plan for the many needed projects in order to make a better case for transportation funding within the City and the Region.

Providing no alternative funds to the City, in light of the Red Line decision, is unacceptable and deserves the harsh criticism it is receiving. Our entire region depends heavily on the image, health, economy and institutions of Baltimore City, the region's heart, the essential part of our identity, its vascular system and its economic well-being. We all should take a position supporting the success of Baltimore City. Baltimore and MTA/MDOT, together, must achieve optimal use of their existing assets. Together, the region's political jurisdictions must take ownership of MTA's and the Baltimore Metropolitan Council's services.