

# Getting serious in Maryland about transit

By: [Joe Nathanson](#) January 28, 2021



Schoolchildren stranded as they wait for a bus to get home from school. Workers constantly risking loss of a job due to lateness as they encounter unreliable transit connections. Persistent reports of buses out of service due to mechanical breakdowns, leading to the unreliable service.

These were the heartfelt concerns patrons of the Maryland Transit Administration voiced in a virtual rally held in mid-January in the early days of the 2021 session of the Maryland General Assembly. The rally garnered a broad coalition of organizations, with over 150 participants.

Those attending the virtual rally included, in addition to individual riders who expressed their frustrations in dealing with our local transit services, representatives of a wide range of interests. Naturally, they included transit advocacy groups, such as the Central Maryland Transit Alliance and Transit Choices. But they also included environmental interests, among them the Sierra Club Maryland Chapter and Howard County Climate Action, along with those seeking racial equity in transit investment decisions, including the NAACP and the Baltimore Transit Equity Coalition. All were there in solidarity for a specific piece of legislation.

The League of Women Voters of Maryland, calling on its members to support the legislation, stated the case plainly. "... we support the use of mass transit for environmental reasons, equity issues, reduction of energy consumption, as well as economic concerns. Maintenance of a healthy transit system enhances all of Maryland."

The Transit Safety and Investment Act is being sponsored by two Baltimore city Democrats, Sen. Cory McCray and Del. Brooke Lierman. Their bills are intended to ensure that equitable funding is provided to meet the MTA needs across the state.

There was a gathering earlier in the month of regional chief local elected officials, including Baltimore Brandon Scott, Baltimore County Executive Johnny Olszewski Jr., Anne Arundel County Executive Steuart Pittman and Howard County Executive Calvin Ball, all in support of the pending legislation.

At that event McCray announced, "I am sponsoring the Transit Safety and Investment Act in the Senate because for too long we have allowed our public transit system to be underfunded, failing to meet core infrastructure needs. Our seniors rely on public transit to pick up prescriptions. Our

children rely on it to get to school. And it's become evidently clearer that our region's front-line workers find public buses and trains a necessity as they meet the essential needs of our neighborhoods."

The bills filed in the House and Senate, HB 114 and SB 199, respectively, address the failure of the state to invest adequately in its transit assets. The Sierra Club notes that Gov. Larry Hogan cut the state's share of MTA's budget by \$188 million, a 21% reduction. No other Maryland Department of Transportation modal administration saw its state investment cut by more than 8%.

Specifically, the proposed legislation is in response to MTA's 10-Year Capital Needs Inventory and Prioritization Report published in July 2019. The report identified a \$1 billion funding gap between MTA's "state of good repair needs" through fiscal year 2028 and the actual funding planned for MTA in the ensuing years.

The heart of the legislation requires that the governor include in the state budget "an appropriation for the state of good repair needs of MTA" in specified amounts, starting at \$361.9 million in FY 2023, rising to \$566.6 in FY 2026 and 2027, plateauing at \$531.6 in FY 2028.

In advocating for her bill, Lierman declared, "The state must maintain its assets and keep up its promise of providing reliable and safe transit to our essential workers and any Marylander who wants it or needs it. Our economy, our environment and the long-term success of our state depend on funding our transit system."

Given Hogan's track record on transit funding, particularly as it relates to the Baltimore region, this will be a tough fight.

But consider this: Many low-income workers cannot afford the costs of auto ownership and insurance and they rely on our transit system. They include home health care workers who provide services to our elderly and child care workers who nurture our young. They include many who stock the shelves of our food markets and pharmacies and those who maintain our public facilities. So many of them must rely on dependable transit services. And we rely on them.

It is a fight worth fighting.

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