

The path forward is not an easy one for SCMAGLEV

By: [Joe Nathanson](#) October 1, 2021



The vision is very seductive: Being able to hop on a train in Baltimore and arriving in Washington, D.C., just 15 minutes later. Or, boarding that train in Washington and enjoying a smooth ride to New York City in just one hour.

That is the vision presented by the developers of Northeast SCMAGLEV (standing for superconducting magnetic levitation), a magnetic levitation railway system developed by Central Japan Railway Company and its affiliated Railway Technical Research Institute.

In 2016, the Federal Railroad Administration awarded \$27.8 million to Maryland's Department of Transportation to prepare preliminary engineering and environmental analysis for a pilot SCMAGLEV train traveling between Baltimore and Washington. Baltimore-Washington Rapid Rail LLC is the private entity providing that initial engineering and technical assistance for the project as it proceeds through the federally required environmental review process.

But, the process to realize the vision seems anything but smooth. The public comment period allowed for interested parties, including communities along the proposed route, to comment on social, economic and environmental impacts.

Community concerns

The City of Baltimore, in a collaboration of planning director Chris Ryer and transportation department head Steven Sharkey, raised a number of concerns in their joint letter to the FRA. They include environmental and land use impacts at either of two stations being considered, one above the Cherry Hill light rail station or, alternatively, underground at the Camden Yards station. The Cherry Hill location entails conflict with independent plans for a major residential development in the Westport area, a matter now in the court system.

Communities in Prince George's County, with the City of Greenbelt leading the charge, say the high-speed train offers little benefit to communities in the D.C. area because it would stop only in Washington, Baltimore and at Baltimore-Washington International Marshall Airport.

But, these localities claim, the construction would have a direct impact on the neighborhoods in between those stops. In addition to the tunneling that would be a substantial portion of the necessary infrastructure, emergency exits and ventilation shafts at many points along the way would require drilling as deep as 150 feet.

Alternatives to MAGLEV

A recent webinar organized by the National Parks Conservation Association, in collaboration with the Coalition for Smart Growth, was billed as “Alternatives to MAGLEV.” Included on the panel of speakers was Del. Jared Solomon, who represents Montgomery County in the Maryland General Assembly.

He describes himself as from “the other Montgomery County,” that is, the suburban Philadelphia jurisdiction where he grew up and used the extensive SEPTA system to reach all parts of that region. He sees more benefit to his constituents from making investments in our existing regional rail system. He says, “we don’t need a shiny new object, when we just have to polish what we have.”

“Polishing what we have” in Solomon’s view would include filling the existing gap in regional rail service between our MARC commuter service and the SEPTA line that terminates in Newark, Delaware. It would include making connections between the Camden and Penn MARC lines in the Baltimore-Washington corridor. And it would finally accommodate “run through” trains, i.e., Virginia Rail Express trains that could travel to Baltimore, just as MARC trains could cross the Potomac River and reach destinations in the suburbs of Northern Virginia.

Northeast Corridor

Baltimore city’s letter pointed out another deficiency of the MAGLEV Draft Environmental Impact Statement. The value of this high-speed train makes sense when it presents itself as an alternative to crowded airspace and interstate highways of the Northeast Corridor, extending to New York and Boston. But, the letter states, “Future plans related to a planned northeast extension, which are not detailed in the DEIS, makes it unclear and fragmentary to evaluate the full extent of the environmental, historical, land use, and transportation impacts” The city recommended the No Build Alternative.

We need to gain greater clarity in our vision relating to transportation solutions in the Northeast Corridor. At the same time the MAGLEV concept is being advanced, the federal government is making substantial commitments to higher level of service provided by Amtrak. Close to home is the estimated \$4 billion investment in a new Baltimore & Potomac (recently renamed Frederick Douglass) tunnel.

It may well be that at some point the corridor will need MAGLEV technology to meet our travel demands. It is not clear that Northeast SCMAGLEV, as currently designed, fills the bill. Perhaps it is for the many thorny questions being raised that the Federal Railroad Administration has decided to pause its review of the project.

Joe Nathanson is the principal of Urban Information Associates, a Baltimore-based economic and community development consulting firm. He can be contacted at urbaninfo@comcast.net.