

World Cup decision shows long-standing regional shortcomings remain

By: Joe Nathanson June 24, 2022



Local soccer fans received disappointing news last week. Word had arrived that Baltimore's bid to host games for the World Cup in 2026 – a bid supposedly strengthened in April by a merger with a competing bid by Washington, D.C. – had fallen short. FIFA, the international governing body that organizes the World Cup contests, had instead kept on their short list of East Coast host cities Philadelphia, New York/ New Jersey, Boston and Miami.

I was not surprised by this outcome. It fits a pattern. Twenty years ago, I was involved through my work with the Baltimore Metropolitan Council, as a bit player, in a similar Washington/Baltimore joint effort to secure the 2012 Summer Olympic games for this region. After a four-year effort, involving thousands of hours of work and costing close to \$10 million, the bid lost out to New York and San Francisco as the potential U.S. entry. (The 2012 games were ultimately awarded to London).

Transportation woes

It may not have been the clinching reason that the two-decades old Olympics proposal was unsuccessful, but the limitations of the region's transportation system were cited in 2002. And questions regarding our transportation system arose again in 2018 in the early stages of the World Cup bid. Local officials say those concerns were addressed, but it is hard to know how, over the past four years, this was done in any meaningful way. Clearly, with the possible exception of Miami, all of the short-listed regions have far more robust regional transportation infrastructure.

In 2000, Michael Wilbon, a sports journalist and TV personality, then writing as a columnist for the Washington Post, had these observations about Washington/ Baltimore prospects for hosting the 2012 Olympics:

"But you know what isn't easy, what the real obstacle is to D.C.-Baltimore's bid? Transportation. Trains. Not buses, boys and girls, trains that go everywhere all the time and on time, every few minutes. Trains from D.C. to Baltimore, trains from swimming at George Mason to, say, basketball at MCI. No cars, Americans — trains ... which take you everywhere at a moment's notice."

Missed chances

The Baltimore region has had multiple occasions when it might have developed a robust public transit system – **including trains**. And, time after time, political leadership has faltered. In 1968, a proposal advanced by the Regional Planning Council included a six-legged regional rail system. That concept did lay the groundwork for the first leg of that system,

which, starting in 1973, became the Metro line running from Owings Mills in Northwest Baltimore County to the Johns Hopkins Hospital in East Baltimore. Plans for extension of the system to the additional lines stalled – and then were abandoned – in the face of opposition by suburban elected officials and residents.

The prospect of a new baseball stadium opening in downtown Baltimore and the enthusiasm of the newly elected “Do it Now” Gov. William Donald Schaefer led to the addition of the north-south light-rail line in 1992. While it was a success in bringing crowds to Orioles Park at Camden Yards on game days, the hastily conceived and designed line, as it crept up and down Howard Street along with autos, trucks and buses, was known derisively by some as the “White Snail Line.”

August 2002 brought about the possibility of a reset with the publication of the Baltimore Regional Rail System Plan. This document, prepared by a blue-ribbon committee, called for the development of a comprehensive regional rail system, adding 66 route miles to the already operating 43 miles of Metro and light rail. Priority was given to an east-west heavy-rail line running from the Social Security complex in the west to as far as Dundalk in the east. Designated the Red Line, this extension of the existing system became the subject of countless community meetings, charrettes, and forums, eventually leading to design concepts and engineering drawings – and a commitment of \$900 million in federal funds. And then, after a process that had extended over a dozen years and had expended many millions of dollars in planning and engineering studies, the plug was pulled.

Another newly elected governor with different views about public transit shut down work on the Red Line. Gov. Larry Hogan, regarding the project a “boondoggle,” then repurposed the federal dollars for highway building in other parts of Maryland. Curiously, in the closing months of his administration, Gov. Hogan’s Maryland Transit Administration has embarked on a new East-West Corridor Study. Coming as part of the legislatively mandated Central Maryland Regional Transit Plan, the public is being invited to evaluate seven alternative proposals with slightly different routes, terminal points and modes (e.g., heavy rail, light rail, bus rapid transit).

Will this study lead to meaningful progress, or another chance to kick the ball down the road?

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