

The missing link in regional rail transportation

By: [Joe Nathanson](#) August 25, 2022



Many years ago, while working on a project for the Town of Brunswick in western Maryland, I took a very early morning MARC train starting near Frederick in order to conduct an onboard survey of commuters traveling into Washington. Arriving in Union Station, I was able to turn around and take a MARC Penn line train north in time for a morning meeting in central Baltimore. If I were traveling to Washington today, my preferred mode would be MARC.

Robust regional rail system

I'm also somewhat familiar with the workings of SEPTA in my hometown of Philadelphia. Starting from the William H. Gray III 30th Street Station, one can make connections to the Main Line and other suburban destinations to the north and west, as well as heading southwest for the Philadelphia International Airport. SEPTA lines ending at Trenton will enable you to join up with New Jersey Transit and continue on to New York City. If you were so inclined, you could make a connection in Center City to the Lindenwold line and head to Atlantic City. If you wanted to engage in more intellectual pursuits, say at the University of Delaware, you could take the Wilmington line to its terminus in Newark, Delaware.

Perryville – Newark Gap

But you could not get to Baltimore. There is about a 20-mile gap between Newark and the northeastern terminus of the Penn line at Perryville in Cecil County. It turns out that's the only segment along Amtrak's Northeast Corridor from Virginia to Connecticut not served by regional rail.

The Maryland General Assembly wants to change that. The Maryland Regional Rail Transformation Act (SB514/HB778), passed by overriding Governor Larry Hogan's veto, calls for investing in and expanding the range of MARC rail service.

The legislation states that "IN FISCAL YEAR 2023, THE ADMINISTRATION SHALL ADVANCE THE FOLLOWING RAIL PRIORITY PROJECTS AS PART OF THE INVESTMENT PROGRAMS REQUIRED ...

In coordination with Delaware, Pennsylvania, the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) and AMTRAK, develop a service and operations plan for MARC, SEPTA or

AMTRAK to run competitive transit schedules between Perryville, Maryland and Newark, Delaware.”

Closing the Perryville – Newark gap is but one of several initiatives called for in the legislation.

Moving toward a solution

But, since we are now a couple of months into FY 2023, I wanted to find out what steps are being taken to advance this particular legislative priority.

If anything is to move forward, it doesn't seem that there will be much near-term help from SEPTA. This is the word from SEPTA media relations: “At this time we do not plan to close the gap between Newark, DE and Perryville, MD. We would look to coordinate service at Newark, similar to coordination with NJ Transit at Trenton Station, to support transfers if Maryland MARC service [were] extended to Newark. SEPTA operates service in Delaware under an agreement with the state of Delaware, so any additional service on SEPTA would need to be supported by Delaware.”

Maryland Transit Administration (MTA) reports having started conversations with key stakeholders on a potential pilot service to Newark, consisting of two morning and two evening trains. “As part of the service expansion process, MDOT MTA is also reviewing draft results from a recently completed ridership model study with the final report anticipated later this year.” These results will enable MTA to collaborate with stakeholders to develop Memoranda of Understanding.

One of those stakeholders with a keen interest in this topic is WILMAPCO, the Wilmington area transportation planning entity. David Gula, a principal planner on the staff, provided me with material indicating that studies of potential ridership have been conducted starting more than 15 years ago. A recent \$50 million complete renovation to the Newark Regional Transportation Center would allow two commuter trains to serve the station at the same time. While other infrastructure improvements would still be required to make the service fully functional, this investment brings the proposed service expansion closer to being realized.

If the project does move forward, there will likely be demand for the service. A 2017 WILMAPCO-sponsored study of the proposal found that ridership would likely increase by about 6%, or perhaps as much as 10%, on the MARC and SEPTA rail lines.

A less scientific approach was offered a couple years ago by Del. Kevin Hornberger, who represents Cecil County in the Maryland General Assembly. “You can go to the Perryville MARC station on any given morning and find license plates from New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Delaware,” he was quoted in the Delaware Business Times. “I think that the demand is there.”

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