Finding a way to improve regional transit decision making

By: Joe Nathanson September 30, 2022

Back in 2015, local government leaders thought they had a plan for moving forward with new transit investments that would better knit together the various elements of the Baltimore area's existing services, notably the area bus lines, the light rail line and the Metro subway. Then, with the decision of Gov. Larry Hogan to cancel the east-west Red Line, that plan was in disarray.

The Red Line was but one component of a 2002 regional transit plan that had been developed by a blue-ribbon task force. Its work product led to more than a decade of planning, intense charettes, countless community meetings, followed by more detailed engineering designs, environmental impact assessments – and a commitment of $900 million in federal funds for construction. Hogan saw it as a "boondoggle."

The governor had the authority to make that decision under the present governance structure for making transit investments in the region. Local government leaders and the Maryland General Assembly wanted to strike a better balance in state/local authority and asked that a study be undertaken to consider alternatives.

I recently had the opportunity to hear Mike Kelly, executive director of the Baltimore Metropolitan Council, describe a process now underway to make recommendations to the state legislature in time for the start of its 2023 session.

The Baltimore Transit Governance and Funding Work Group, a 13-person assemblage chaired by Del. Tony Bridges is now at work to arrive at the appropriate governance structure and sources of revenue to make transit improvements in the future.

Study of alternatives

The work group will have the benefit of a consultant study commissioned by the Baltimore Regional Transportation Board and completed in August 2021 that provided a broad review of the range of options. The Baltimore Regional Transit Governance and Funding Study did a thorough analysis of possible new arrangements for managing and funding a complex system of services, facilities and workforces.

As part of its analysis, the study team looked at five peer regions in other states, as well as that of the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA), to understand alternative governance and funding structures. The transit agencies of those peer regions included Charlotte

Area Transit System, Metro Transit St. Louis, Salt Lake City's UTA, Southeastern Pennsylvania's SEPTA, and Southeast Michigan's SMART.

The study points out that the Maryland Transit Administration is responsible for three distinct components of operations: the core Baltimore bus, light rail, subway and paratransit services; commuter express buses and MARC commuter rail; and the locally operated transit services (LOTS), think Charm City Circulator, Howard Transit or Carroll County TrailBlazer.

Using FY 2019 as its reference year, the study notes that Maryland Department of Transportation (MDOT) allocated more than $1.1 billion to support these operations. Baltimore's locally-oriented services accounted for $797 million ($550M operating, $247M capital); commuter bus and MARC rail operations received $304 million ($231M, $73M); and LOTS received $41 million ($39M, $2M).

How these funds, coming from federal, state and local governments, from passenger fares and other minor sources of revenue, can be available to sustain and expand future operations is at the crux of the challenge posed to the work group.

With the benefit of that reconnaissance of peer regions and detailed staff and consultant analysis, the work group is considering five models. They range from Model 1, a State Transportation Commission, appointed by the governor and legislature, with representation from regional and local jurisdictions, to a more robust Model 5 which would create a Baltimore Regional Transit Authority that would merge all existing public transit services in the region into a single entity. It essentially would be akin to WMATA.

This new authority would become the direct recipient of federal transit funding for the Baltimore area. A crucial assumption is that the state, which would be represented on the authority, would continue to financially support transit operations "at levels consistent with existing spending." There was the suggestion that Model 5 would be a heavy lift.

In any case, the Baltimore Metropolitan Council's professional staff is not offering its preferred option. That is intended to be in the province of the work group, which is operating on a tight time frame. Having held its initial meeting earlier in September, it is scheduled to meet once in each of the following three months.

The group will present its recommendation to the General Assembly and then it will be up to that body, which initiated this process, to come to some meaningful decisions.

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