

Maryland's Many Transit Challenges

Joe Nathanson//November 1, 2024//



It's no exaggeration that the Maryland Transit Administration is facing some enormous challenges. The MTA is that agency within the state's Department of Transportation responsible for operating a system of core bus services concentrated within Baltimore City and nearby suburbs, longer commuter bus routes, the METRO subway system, Light Rail service, the MARC commuter trains, and a paratransit service.

The challenges involved in operating and maintaining this critical network of services include a budget deficit arising from the realities of increasing operating costs and declining revenues. In the face of this structural deficit the MTA is proposing various cuts in its services to the dismay of transit riders and advocates.

To address these complex issues the state has established not one, but two separate advisory commissions to develop and present recommendations to Gov. Wes Moore and the General Assembly.

The Maryland Commission on Transit Revenue and Infrastructure Needs, or the TRAIN Commission as it's known, was established in 2023 to review and evaluate transportation funding priorities throughout Maryland. Early in their work the commissioners received a jolt. As they reported, "During our deliberations, the commission faced an unexpected challenge with the release of MDOT's draft Consolidated Transportation Program (CTP) in September [2023], revealing a funding shortfall exceeding \$2 billion over the next six years. This shortfall, coupled with the unprecedented nature of the situation, prompted the commission to divert its immediate attention to policy updates and discussions on new transportation revenue and fee options."

Concerns about funding for current operations, for deferred investments in the state's existing transit infrastructure, and for future expansions are also at the heart the work of the Baltimore Regional Transit Commission.

The BRTC was also established last year by the General Assembly. Its focus is on the Baltimore metropolitan area, with the intention of providing local leaders with a greater say in transportation priorities for the region. The 16-member commission, with representatives appointed by the governor, Baltimore's mayor and the Anne Arundel, Baltimore and Howard county executives, first met early this year.

The commissioners include employers, industry experts, transit riders, and others with a stake in improving the region's transit services. Jon Laria, a senior attorney at Ballard Spahr, has been involved in both commissions and is currently chairing the BRTC. I recently heard Laria's presentation at an online meeting of Transit Choices, a local transportation advocacy group.

MTA requires significant commitments of funding to meet the demands of the region for access to employment centers, to schools and universities, to health care facilities and other essential services. Decades of underfunding have left MTA's core services in a state of disrepair. Laria noted that this situation has disproportionate impact on lower income communities, notably the African-American residents in these communities.

Laria used several key numbers to highlight the commission's concerns. \$512 million – that's the MTA's annual need according to its 2022 Capital Needs Inventory. The Draft CTP meets that need in only two of its six years.

The Transit Safety and Investment Act of 2021 calls for \$450 million for both FY 2025 and FY 2026. The Draft CTP falls short by \$188 million across those two budget years. \$1.2 billion is another very large number to consider. That's the funding scheduled for the Washington-area Purple Line. While Laria is a supporter of this new transit line serving Montgomery and Prince George's counties, the commission takes note that this accounts for about 25 percent of all capital spending that has been programmed.

Laria also referenced the \$213 million in the form of a federal grant for replacement of the Light Rail cars that are now more than three decades old. This is good news, but

only if Maryland is able to come up with the needed matching funds. The potential loss of these federal funds would be a substantial missed opportunity to upgrade the Baltimore area transit system.

In addition to this focus on finances, the BRTC is also looking into new models of governance for this region's transit services. They are considering 1) an independent transit authority with responsibility for day-to-day operations and maintenance of the system and 2) a fiduciary commission with a concentration on the financial aspects of running a regional transit service.

Whatever the form of governance, whether MTA remains a modal division of MDOT or a new entity is created, the central issue will still be the financing of operating, maintaining and potentially expanding the system. With that in mind some forward-thinking politicians will have to confront an obvious challenge: the continuing decline of transportation's largest revenue source, the motor fuel tax, as the nation transitions from petroleum powered cars to electric vehicles.

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