

Montgomery County Taxpayers League

Advocate for accountable, cost-effective county government



Summary of Taxpayers League January Monthly Meeting Focused on Transportation

The Montgomery County Taxpayers League welcomed a number of distinguished guests to our January monthly meeting. The meeting focused on the Transportation options for Montgomery County currently being debated or already moving forward. We want to thank our guests: Sean Emerson (Councilmember Hucker's office); Robert Windley (Citizens 4 Transportation Relief); and Bob Eisinger (founder, The High Roads Foundation). We also wish to thank the many other meeting attendees who brought considerable knowledge in the areas discussed. The focus of the meeting were the following two transportation options– 1) highway expansion; and 2) monorail.

Expansion of I270/I495/American Legion Bridge -- Robert Windley presented updates on Gov. Hogan's plan, approved by the MD Board of Public Works in January, to expand the Beltway and I-270 by adding express toll lanes. As a "P3" project, it is fully financed and constructed by private-sector firms that would also assume maintenance costs on all new and existing lanes. The MD Transportation Authority will be charged with setting toll rates. Estimates of toll rates are still forthcoming. Mr. Windley noted that "MDOT has projected that drivers traveling on I-495 from the American Legion Bridge to I-95 will have driving times reduced from 103 minutes to 16 minutes on the Toll lanes and to 36 minutes on Non-Toll lanes, based on expected volumes in 2040)." Due to opposition from officials in Montgomery and PG counties, Phase One will be limited to expansion of the American Legion Bridge and I-270, with widening of I-495 in suburban Maryland set aside for Phase Two consideration. Sean Emerson from Councilman Hucker's office noted that opposition is "in part, due to the 34 homes that would be 'taken' for right-of-way, and would like to first explore viaducts, spot management, and shoulder use strategies to reduce I495 congestion."

Monorail -- Bob Eisinger of The High Roads Foundation presented an overview of the possibilities for monorail in suburban Maryland and the DC metro area. Monorail -- a network of above-ground trains built along highway routes and through cities -- is a solution (especially long-term) that is beginning to get more discussion. His presentation detailed initial routes that would create a network of commute alternatives from Frederick to the Metro red line, Bethesda, across the American Legion Bridge, and along the ICC. Information on monorail may be found at the following links: www.thehighroadfoundation.org and www.thehighroadfoundation.org/video-presentations.

Monorail routes can largely be built on existing right-of-ways with little disruption to current traffic and could conceivably serve tens of thousands of passengers every day. Early cost estimates to build adjacent to I-270 is \$137M per mile, which would be highly cost-competitive versus other options. It has environmental benefits (with a near zero stormwater footprint) and is compatible with autonomous cars. A key question is to what extent would it be used. There are lots of factors that go into play here. Current models hope for as many as 50,000 passengers on the line from Frederick to Bethesda. Of course, increasing the network and number of connections to other transit would go a long way toward making this option much more popular. The MDOT will be studying all of this over the next few months.

Taxpayers League's Position -- It is often said that "we need a little bit of everything." But, when we consider the county's competing commuter, economic, environmental, and affordable housing needs against the limited resources available, ***it would be to the great benefit of residents for years to come if options most likely to meet quantified, stated objectives in a cost-effective manner are prioritized.*** The Taxpayer League finds that the conduct and availability of such quantitative, objective analysis has often been inadequate, and certainly not commensurate with the considerable enormous costs to taxpayers. Over the coming months, the Taxpayers League will be following up to assemble this data for all options, so that a cogent analysis may be conducted.