



March 10, 2017

Dear Interested Community Members:

Thank you for your letter concerning the planned public hearing for the US 29 Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) project and the County Executive's request for funding for the US 29 BRT project. You have raised a number of issues, which I have addressed below.

Public Participation Has Been Integral for Nearly 10 Years of Planning for BRT

Plans for BRT on US 29 have actually been in development for nearly 10 years and public engagement for the proposed project has built upon earlier planning efforts that offered substantial opportunities for public involvement. These opportunities included the development of the Countywide Transit Corridors Functional Master Plan (CTCFMP) through the Planning Board's and County Council's public participation processes.

Once the CTCFMP was adopted, work began on specifically advancing study of BRT on US 29. In the last two years, the US 29 BRT project has been the subject of a Maryland Department of Transportation (MDOT) study and the opportunities for input on the project have gone well beyond the typical State or County public process. Before the outset of the US 29 BRT corridor study, the County Council established a requirement for a higher level of community engagement than is customary for transportation projects. The Council specified formation of Corridor Advisory Committees (CACs) to ensure engagement of the most directly-affected stakeholders in the BRT projects. MDOT, in coordination with MCDOT, diligently embraced the required CAC process for public engagement throughout the study. The result is that public input has directly guided the project now proposed for implementation.

Over the last two years, the State and County have held **19 public meetings with Corridor Advisory Committees on US 29**, a group of approximately 60 community members who represent the neighborhoods along the corridor. Meetings were held on the following dates:

- February 28, 2015 (*two meetings*)
- March 26, 2015
- March 31, 2015
- May 28, 2015
- June 2, 2015
- September 8, 2015
- September 10, 2015
- December 1, 2015

- December 2, 2015
- February 1, 2016
- May 18, 2016
- May 24, 2016
- July 14, 2016
- July 20, 2016
- September 22, 2016
- September 26, 2016
- January 31, 2017
- February 2, 2017

The CAC members were selected by their respective communities. One of their primary responsibilities is to share information from the meetings with their neighbors and those who selected them, obtain their input and convey this information to other CAC members, MDOT, and MCDOT.

To more widely share information, the CAC meetings are open to the public and all meeting materials, including video recordings of the meetings, are posted on the County's BRT website for public review. Consistently throughout this process, MCDOT has offered to meet with any interested individuals and community groups about their concerns, and many residents and groups have availed themselves of these opportunities.

The project that **MCDOT is now advancing includes the station locations and transit service plans studied through the State's US 29 analysis** that included substantial public input from community members. In fact, the decision not to include the managed lane portion of the project at this time is based, in part, on concerns we have heard from the community about potential traffic impacts. There is no roadway construction included in the County's planned implementation of BRT on US 29, and other elements that would have right-of-way impacts, such as station locations, are being adopted from the State's documented corridor study. All elements of the County's BRT implementation, which includes new bus service, stations, transit signal priority, and bike/pedestrian improvements, have all been included in the study that has been conducted and vetted with the community over the last two years. The CAC members' input has shaped the project that is being advanced as an outcome of the planning process.

Plans to Further Engage the Public

As the project transitions from planning into design with MCDOT as the lead agency, we are stepping up our engagement activities. MCDOT will continue to meet with the CACs every one to two months to ensure community members have ample opportunity to provide input on the details of the project design. In addition, we are holding three Open Houses on March 7, 13 and 15 in advance of the Council's March 21 public hearing, as an opportunity for additional conversation with people interested in the County's plans to improve transit service on the corridor. A second set of Open Houses will be held in September as the project nears completion of preliminary design. In an effort to reach as broad a constituency as possible

during the design phase of the project, we also plan to develop a “virtual” open house with the materials from the March meetings so that community members who are not able to attend in person can learn about the project and provide their input.

Our project team recognizes that there are community members who may have little knowledge of the County’s plans for BRT, so in November MCDOT launched our GetOnBoardBRT education and outreach campaign to engage with County residents more broadly in the plans for BRT. Our team has developed an easy-to-use website and informational videos; engaged on social media; held or attended 20 outreach events; and met with several major employers. All of our future outreach activities for the US 29 and other BRT projects in the County will be coordinated with the GetOnBoardBRT education efforts.

As part of the US 29 BRT project’s design phase, MCDOT is developing a comprehensive Public Involvement Plan (PIP) that will include outreach events, coordination with civic associations, employer focus groups, newsletters and other strategies for soliciting even more public feedback. A draft of the PIP will be provided to the CAC members so they can suggest other strategies we may want to consider. Our goal is to reach out as broadly as possible to community members who may use and benefit from the BRT, as well as those who could be more directly impacted along the corridor itself.

Why a Transportation System Management Alternative is Not Needed for the US 29 BRT

Regarding your comments about inclusion of a Transportation System Management (TSM) alternative in MDOT’s Corridor Planning Study, the Maryland Transit Administration provided a response to this issue several months ago. . The State and County decision not to include a TSM alternative for US 29 was based on the fact that the two BRT alternatives that were being considered for this corridor did not include substantial infrastructure expansion or significant property or environmental impacts outside the existing right-of-way. **The proposed BRT project is composed of the elements that typically constitute a TSM alternative.**

A TSM Alternative is an option frequently studied as part of alternatives on projects that involve significant infrastructure expansion like new highways or rail lines. In these cases, a TSM alternative includes a mix of smaller operational and infrastructure improvement components that would collectively provide capacity, efficiency and reliability enhancements in place of major infrastructure expansion. These TSM improvements are intended to be a lower-cost and lower-impact option compared to larger more complex build alternatives. At the same time, TSM includes enhancements beyond simple operational improvement, such as regular maintenance, and minor system performance updates.

The US 29 BRT project includes the elements typically found in a TSM alternative including transit signal priority, station/stop upgrades, new buses, and pedestrian and bicycle

accessibility improvements. Based on the findings of the State's study and community input, the project does not include roadway expansion at intersections or designation of transit lanes even though these strategies are often considered as part of a TSM alternative.

Adding MetroExtra Service on the US 29 Corridor

Your letter also requests consideration be given to offering MetroExtra service on US 29. MetroExtra service is provided by the Metropolitan Washington Area Transit Authority (WMATA) on several corridors in the region, including on New Hampshire Avenue in Montgomery and Prince George's counties.

MetroExtra and similar service enhancements address transit system demand needs by adding more buses, modifying routes, changing service frequencies, etc. MetroExtra does not provide the significant capacity, service quality, transit accessibility, and reliability enhancements delivered by the proposed US 29 BRT. While MetroExtra has been a very successful service on New Hampshire Avenue, carrying about 2,000 riders per day, the anticipated ridership of 13,000 per day on US 29 warrants a much higher level of service than can be feasibly provided by MetroExtra limited stop service.

It is important to note that the **annual operating cost** for MetroExtra service should not be compared to the estimated **capital cost** to upgrade transit **infrastructure** on the US 29 corridor. The costs included in the CIP for the County's US 29 BRT project are for infrastructure investments like stations; larger, high-capacity vehicles; transit signal priority and pedestrian/bike improvements, including new Bikeshare stations. None of those costs are included in WMATA's operating cost estimates. Furthermore, the \$10 million in Federal investment that the County is receiving for the US 29 BRT project is specifically for funding BRT infrastructure and cannot be used to fund MetroExtra service.

When comparing the estimated operating cost for MetroExtra service on US 29 to the cost of the County's Ride On system operating the BRT, a fair comparison can only be made if the same frequency and span of service are considered. Many of the lower costs that have been quoted for the MetroExtra service are for less frequent or peak only service, so they are not comparable to the level of service that will be provided on the US 29 BRT. WMATA's estimated annual operating cost for MetroExtra service operating at the same frequency and hours as the US 29 BRT is **\$9.6 million/year**, which is about **\$2 million/year higher** than the estimated cost for Ride On to operate the BRT. WMATA's estimate is consistent with the system-wide costs of MetroBus service in comparison to Ride On. Systematically, Ride On is less costly to operate than MetroBus.

As a final but important point, counties in Maryland (Montgomery and Prince George's) do not fund WMATA. Funding of WMATA capital and operating costs are the responsibility of the

Maryland Department of Transportation (MDOT), which is maximizing its contributions to Metro to support the agency as it faces major financial challenges while endeavoring to get their system “Back to Good.” MDOT provides more than \$300 million in operating funds to WMATA per year, and has recently agreed to an additional \$40 million next year to fund WMATA’s operating budget shortfall. MDOT is providing these resources despite shortfalls in its own revenues and cuts to its own programs.

WMATA ultimately has the discretion for determining where the funds from the State of Maryland are used. Last year, the County asked MDOT to fund MetroExtra service on Veirs Mill Road, and was informed by MDOT that they do not have the financial capacity to provide additional funds and that it is WMATA’s decision to provide the services they deem most beneficial with the funding that is provided by the State.

As WMATA is currently facing extreme financial and operational challenges, MetroBus service expansion is a very low priority. Right now, Metro is proposing cuts to Red Line service and important bus services in Montgomery County (including Z-line service on US 29) as part of its FY18 budget. If additional State resources are provided to Metro, reversing these cuts would likely be the first priority for those funds -- well ahead of any service expansion.

Thank you for your continued interest in the US 29 BRT project and I encourage you to remain engaged in the Corridor Advisory Committees and ample other public process opportunities as the project moves into design.

Al R. Roshdieh

Director

Montgomery County Department of Transportation