

Proposed Law Would Bar MTA From Taking Homes, But It's Probably Unneeded

*Andy Rosen
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ANNAPOLIS — The General Assembly is considering a measure that would prohibit the Maryland Transit Administration from taking any homes from residents if it builds the planned Red Line project.

The move appears to be largely symbolic, as none of the plans that the MTA is reviewing for the east-west link between Woodlawn and Southeast Baltimore would align its route in such a way that would result in residential displacement. In addition, the MTA has said in planning documents that it will not move people, and has signed onto a community agreement with the city and residents pledging not to take residential property.

The state has identified four businesses that may have to be moved for the project. The prohibition in the bill would run through 2013.

Still, the measure has gained the backing of many who hope that the state can put residents' fears to rest by enacting a law to back up their promises. Community groups, especially in West Baltimore, say many people are still upset about the process the city and state used to build the "road to nowhere," a section of U.S. Route 40 that was originally intended to connect Interstate 95 to Interstate 70.

During the construction of that road in the late 1970s, about 700 homes were purchased and removed.

"Fear is a big issue. That's what we wanted to discuss," said Cynthia Shaw, vice president of the Lyndhurst Community Association in Edmondson Village. "We felt that this would put in writing peace of mind for our senior residents."

The city of Baltimore is behind the initiative (SB 614), sponsored in the Senate by Sen. Lisa A. Gladden, D-Baltimore City, and in the House by Del. Nathaniel T. Oaks, D-Baltimore City, while the MTA is staying out of the debate. Gladden called hers a "feel-good bill."

"Community members are nervous when there is a major ... construction plan that may involve acquiring property and disrupting neighborhoods," Gladden said Friday, before the Senate Finance Committee heard the Red Line bill.

Danyell Diggs, the Baltimore Department of Transportation's Red Line coordinator, said the change will not slow the project, which the city sees as critical to easing traffic congestion. Since the state's plans do not call for any homes to be taken, she said, it should not affect construction of the line, which the state hopes to begin running by 2015.

The state has not yet chosen from 11 alternatives that it has identified for the project, but the city, Baltimore County and many business and community groups are getting behind an estimated \$1.6 billion light rail option that would travel below ground at Cooks Lane in West Baltimore, re-emerge and then travel under downtown, Harbor East and Fells Point.

The state is expected to make its choice this spring, and could apply to the federal government for money to build the Red Line in the summer.