

# Light Rail Red Line Plan Is The Best Option

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Gov. Martin O'Malley's endorsement Tuesday of a 14.5-mile light rail line to connect Woodlawn to Johns Hopkins Bayview medical complex came as little surprise -- even to opponents. From the start, light rail has been the most sensible option for the Red Line. It is likely to attract the most riders, operate the fastest and produce the biggest boost for the city's economy.

The \$1.6 billion project is not without controversy. While the trains will go underground for 3.9 miles beneath the downtown area and Cooks Lane to the west (and slightly under 1 mile along overpasses to avoid the beltway and other obstacles), most of the tracks will run along the surface.

For some residents, particularly those in certain parts of Canton, this is viewed -- unfairly, we believe -- as a monstrous development on par with the urban interstate plans of a generation ago. Indeed, it was noteworthy that the governor made his announcement from the West Baltimore MARC commuter rail station in the shadow of the so-called "highway to nowhere," the disconnected nine-block hunk of expressway that, instead of the U.S. 40 extension that its planners envisioned, has served only as an obstacle for the neighborhood.

Might light rail cars on Boston Street prove as disastrous? That has not been the case in other cities and it need not be here. The Maryland Transit Administration has already promised that Red Line cars will not be the behemoths of the Central Light Rail Line but smaller, sleeker, low-platform vehicles that should have not greater impact on streets than buses.

As Rep. Elijah Cummings, a longtime light rail proponent noted at yesterday's announcement, the project calls for not a single city or county resident to be displaced. That's an extraordinary achievement for so large a construction project.

Nevertheless, the governor's endorsement does not make the project a fait accompli. It will have to compete for federal funding with similar transit proposals from dozens of other communities across the country. And even if successful, the state will be expected to provide hundreds of millions of dollars as well -- money that isn't currently available in the state's transportation trust fund.

Securing that funding should be a top priority for Mr. O'Malley. It will require action bolder than raising the tax on car purchases as he has done in the past -- especially since the Red Line seems inevitably connected (not physically but politically) to the equally expensive Washington suburban Purple Line connecting Bethesda and New Carrollton which the governor yesterday also pledged will be light rail.

Neither project is perfect, and compromises (the choice to make the Red Line's tunnel under Cooks Lane wide enough for only a single track, a cost-savings mandated by the federal government's rather arbitrary funding formula, for example) are an unfortunate part of the process. Not everyone is bound to be pleased by the prospect of trains running in front of their homes.

But the need for greater transit options is clear enough. Baltimore traffic congestion can't be relieved by building more roads, adding more cars and burning more imported oil. Neither the nation's economy and security nor the world's environment can tolerate it. Connecting the city's east and west sides by light rail offers Baltimore the best possible solution to its transportation ills.