

Red Line Foes See Red

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Gov. Martin O'Malley faced vocal opposition from Canton residents Tuesday as he unveiled a plan for a Red Line light rail train between Woodlawn and Bayview, although the plan has substantial support among regional business and political leaders.

O'Malley said he is asking the federal government to help pay for a tunnel under Cooks Lane and downtown. The \$1.6 billion, 14-mile Red Line project will otherwise run on the surface and could be under construction by 2013, the governor said.

In announcing his plan for the line at an event in Baltimore, O'Malley met a sharply divided crowd. Some residents from Canton, where the line would run mostly above ground, denounced the Red Line's path with angry boos. At one point, it appeared that some protestors were close to a physical confrontation with a supporter of the line.

Though there is still some strong resistance to the Red Line's surface run along Edmondson Avenue, many community leaders in the area have gotten behind the project. On Tuesday, many of them attributed a swing in community support to a bill that passed during this year's General Assembly session that bars the state through 2013 from taking any residential property to build the project.

O'Malley's proposal differs from a similar, earlier proposal in that trains would run on one track instead of two beneath Cooks Lane. It also expands tunneling along a small portion of Boston Street and combines two stops near Howard Street downtown.

In choosing the light rail alternative, O'Malley passed over several bus-oriented options that had been on the table.

He also announced Tuesday that he is supporting a \$1.5 billion light rail project in the Washington suburbs known as the Purple Line.

It would run 16 miles between New Carrollton and Bethesda.

Both projects will have to be submitted to the Federal Transit Administration, as the state looks for significant federal assistance to build them.

The state projects that it will also begin construction on the Purple Line in 2013, though O'Malley acknowledged that the course of either could be altered by federal funding decisions.

The Maryland Transit Administration previously said it expects a 50 percent federal share for each project, but O'Malley said the share was uncertain.

O'Malley's proposal largely follows a plan backed by Baltimore City Mayor Sheila Dixon and Baltimore County Executive James T. Smith Jr. as well as several civic groups. Still, he said a project of that size was unlikely to gain unanimous support.

"I think it is important to acknowledge that there are some who do not want light rail, but none of [these] projects is without criticism and opposition and people with differences of opinion," O'Malley said.

Transportation officials said Tuesday that the single-tracking change would save the state between \$60 million and \$70 million, which will help keep the state below federal cost-effectiveness guidelines.

The proposal also combines two stations previously planned at the University of Maryland at Baltimore and on Howard Street. That change could save between \$50 million and \$60 million.

The trains would emerge from a downtown tunnel farther down Boston Street than previously discussed — around Montford Street rather than at Aliceanna Street.

The surface line along Boston Street in Canton has drawn fierce opposition, and the change didn't appear to assuage the foes who came to O'Malley's announcement at the West Baltimore MARC Train station.

"We're for the Red Line, but we're against the surface rail on Boston Street," said Gerry Aronin, of Canton Cove. "They've eliminated the possibility of any other streets, except to destroy Boston Street."

Caroline Burkhart, who lives on Elliott Street said she thinks the tunnel will obstruct pedestrian crossing on the street.

"It comes up out of the ground, and there are concrete walls on both sides of it," she said.

Del. Melvin Stukes, D-Baltimore City, who represents parts of West Baltimore and also works for the Maryland Transit Administration, said he is not convinced that the Edmondson Avenue alignment is best.

Still, he said the Red Line has to move forward to help modernize the city's transportation system.

The single-tracking under Cooks Lane concerns Stukes, though. He said the state should have learned its lesson from the city's light rail system, which recently underwent a costly double-tracking to speed the line's travel through town.

"That to me doesn't make any kind of logical sense," he said.

O'Malley said earlier in the day that the shortness of the single track — about a mile — combined with its location on the line, should minimize the effect.

Congressman Elijah Cummings, D-Md., who spoke at the event announcing the Red Line plan, responded to the hecklers in the crowd by saying the project has only a limited amount of time to be built.

"The stars have aligned," he said, "If we don't take advantage of this here, can I tell you something? Your tax dollars will go somewhere else."