

GBC Urges Light Rail Over Buses for East-West Line

*Michael Dresser
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A leading business group is pushing a plan to build a light rail line between Woodlawn and East Baltimore that would include substantial tunneling to go underneath downtown and neighborhoods opposed to surface tracks.

The Greater Baltimore Committee urged the Maryland Transit Administration yesterday to reject the alternative of building dedicated bus lanes for the proposed east-west Red Line through Baltimore. Instead, it supported a 14-mile light rail plan that would run in tunnels under central Baltimore, Fells Point and Cooks Lane in West Baltimore. The proposed line would cost an estimated \$1.6 billion.

Donald C. Fry, president of the GBC, said the organization has leaned toward light rail since it began studying the Red Line in 2002, but had been keeping its options open. Now, he said, the group has determined that rail would be the better choice for the region.

"It's a system we're familiar with," he said, referring to the Baltimore area's existing north-south light rail line. He said studies have consistently shown that light rail would attract more riders than the dedicated bus lanes that still remain an option for the MTA.

Alternatives that would run transit lines on the surface along Fleet and Aliceanna streets have run into fierce opposition in Fells Point, while neighbors along Cooks Lane have been equally vociferous in fighting plans to run trains or buses along that street.

The alternative the GBC is backing, known as 4-C, would involve running trains at ground level on Edmondson Avenue - a proposal that has run into opposition in some West Baltimore neighborhoods. The MTA studied alternatives that would tunnel under Edmondson Avenue but determined that such a plan would be too costly to qualify for federal funding.

In addition to the Cooks Lane tunnel, the GBC-backed plan would include a tunnel running under downtown and Fells Point before emerging at Canton on its way to the Johns Hopkins Bayview campus. Under this plan, the Red Line would connect with both the existing light rail line and the Metro, though the link to the Charles Center subway station would be made through a 600-foot pedestrian tunnel with a moving walkway.

The final decision on the "locally preferred alternative" will be made by Gov. Martin O'Malley early next year after the MTA receives public comments on the environmental impact study it released last week. The MTA said yesterday it will take comments through Jan. 5, including at four public hearings in November, after which it will make a recommendation to the governor.

After the governor makes his decision, the state will send its proposal to the Federal Transit Administration, which will weigh the costs and benefits of the plan against competing projects from other cities around the country.

Some local transit advocates have been urging the MTA to pursue "heavy rail" similar to the existing Metro subway. But Henry Kay, the MTA's deputy administrator for planning, said the agency has determined a subway is "not a feasible alternative" under federal cost guidelines.

"Cost-effectiveness is not the only consideration, but under the current federal program, it's a key one," Kay said.