

Greater Baltimore Committee Urges Adoption of Red Line Plan with Light Rail, Strategic Tunnels

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The Greater Baltimore Committee is urging state transportation planners to adopt a plan that would make the east-west Red Line from Woodlawn to Bayview a light rail system with two strategically-placed tunnels.

The plan the GBC favors, called Alternative 4-C, would tunnel a light rail line under Baltimore's downtown and Fells Point, and under Cooks Lane on the western leg of the route, said GBC President & CEO Donald C. Fry.

"The combination of light rail with these two tunnels at key points of potential congestion would offer the most efficient and most cost-effective practical option for the Red Line project," Fry said. "A quality east-west light rail route that connects with our existing Metro, MARC, and light rail would transform Baltimore's current transit hodge-podge into an integrated regional rail system."

Alternative 4-C would cost approximately \$1.6 billion to build and would carry an estimated 42,000 passengers per weekday - more than triple the number of riders on existing local bus routes from Woodlawn to Southeast Baltimore, according to Maryland Transit Administration estimates. It is one of 11 potential options for the Red Line that are being considered by MTA planners.

The MTA has scheduled four public hearings in November on the Red Line options. The planning stage of the project is nearing completion. Preliminary engineering work is expected to begin in spring 2009. Construction is scheduled to start in 2013.

Options under consideration feature either bus rapid transit or light rail and include alternatives ranging from all-surface routes to having the entire Red Line operate underground. Construction costs range from \$545 million for bus rapid transit on an entirely surface route to \$2.4 billion for an entirely underground route for either bus rapid transit or light rail.

"After considering all of the Red Line options, the costs, and the benefits involved, the GBC board of directors enthusiastically endorses Alternative 4-C," said GBC Chairman Atwood "Woody" Collins III. "It would provide the missing link to the Baltimore region's transit system. Comprehensive, reliable and cost-effective transit is an essential element to a good business climate and quality of life," said Collins, who is president of M&T Bank's Mid-Atlantic division.

The GBC, the region's most prominent organization of business and civic leaders, has aggressively advocated for the development of a comprehensive regional rail transit system since 2002, when a Maryland Department of Transportation advisory committee crafted the current regional rail plan. The GBC's Fry served on the committee. Construction of the Red Line was the plan's top-priority project.

"Despite the increased construction expense of tunneling, the cost of alternative 4-C is within reach in terms of qualifying for federal funding," said Fry. "Other advantages are that, of all of the realistic alternatives being considered, this option would attract the greatest ridership and the most new riders, and would be the least costly to operate once it is built."

Under option 4-C, it would take half the time to ride the Red Line from one end to the other than it currently takes riders of existing local bus service, the MTA estimates.