

"Federation Corner" column
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Task force plans bus rapid transit system

by Dan Wilhelm
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NOTE: The author of this column, Dan Wilhelm, was appointed to the Transit Task Force as the Montgomery County Civic Federation representative.

Four months ago in the Federation Corner column ("Curbing county transit woes", September 22, 2011), I provided an overview of the Transit Task Force created by County Executive Isiah Leggett and its work. I reported that the Transit Task Force had identified the design attributes needed in the rapid transit system to make it a world class, gold standard system.

The system being proposed by the Transit Task Force consists of twenty-one routes: sixteen routes identified in an earlier MCDOT (Montgomery County Department of Transportation) BRT (bus rapid transit) study, some of which the task force extended, plus five additional routes. The system would use sleek and stylish Rapid Transit Vehicles (RTVs) that are in the class of Metrorail cars, not local buses. Concurrently, the Planning Board is working on a revision to the county Master Plan of Highways and its own BRT study, which started with the sixteen routes in the MCDOT BRT Study and will be expanded to include the other routes as well.

Since September, the Transit Task Force identified those routes that it recommends be built in each of three phases. The first phase includes MD 355 from the Bethesda metro station to Montgomery Village Avenue (and allows for connection to the Corridor Cities Transitway), Randolph Road/Cherry Hill Road, the InterCounty Connector/I-370, Veirs Mill Road, Georgia Avenue from Veirs Mill to Olney, and US 29 from University Blvd. to MD 198 (which allows for connection to the Purple Line).

In addition, the phasing was selected so that construction would occur only on one of several parallel roads at the same time to allow drivers to avoid the construction if desired. The thinking is that construction of the entire system will start in 5 years and be completed in 10 years.

The Transit Task Force also obtained a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to fund two studies, both of which were scheduled to be completed by the end of 2011. One study will address the economic benefits from the RTV system.

The second study funded by the grant will look at where dedicated RTV lanes can be built. This study will expand upon the MCDOT BRT study which limited the dedicated lanes to the existing right-of-way. The current study removes the right-of-way restriction, but dedicated routes would still be constrained by existing development. In some places, two dedicated lanes are possible, in others only one lane is possible, and in some places the RTVs will need to travel in existing traffic lanes.

In terms of controlling cost, the design will frequently have one dedicated lane in the peak direction of travel and the use of existing travel lanes for the other direction. Two major considerations in this design are station locations and how to handle motor vehicle left-turn requirements (the idea being that the RTVs would often travel in what today is the median strip).

The financing investigation is just getting underway. Part of the purpose of the above lane study is to refine the cost estimate. The thinking at this point is that the RTV system will largely be financed by a new special taxing district within the county, but some funds would be provided by the state. There are

many ways the special taxing district could be set up, and the alternatives will be the focus of Transit Task Force meetings through the middle of January.

The Task Force expects to complete its work and provide a report to County Executive Leggett by the end of February. At that point, I expect the Executive will make a recommendation to the County Council for its action. The Council is well aware of the work of the Transit Task Force, since two council members--Marc Elrich and Roger Berliner--regularly attend Task Force meetings and have been active participants.

The program for the March 2012 Civic Federation meeting will present the results of the Transit Task Force. Please plan to attend. In the meantime, a summary of meetings and copies of presentations given at the meetings can be found at <http://tinyurl.com/transitsumm> .

The RTV system is designed to address existing traffic congestion and provide capacity for future development. Even if Montgomery County decided to stop all development in the county (which is not being considered), development will occur in neighboring jurisdictions and cars would travel through the county, adding to our congestion. It is better to have and manage development in Montgomery County, and the RTV system will provide the capacity to move people. Since development will also occur in neighboring jurisdictions, the RTV system is designed to connect with them, if those governments decide to extend the system into their communities.

Not everyone can or will be willing to use the RTV system. But only a small percentage of people need to use it to reduce traffic congestion on our roads. Consider the effect on traffic congestion that occurs in August, when there is ten to fifteen percent reduction in vehicle trips. I think the number of people who will decide to use the RTV, and the accompanying revamped local bus system, will be much higher than fifteen percent.

I believe the RTV system has the highest chance of being financed and constructed and within a reasonable time frame than any other major project proposed in my thirty years of civic involvement. This year, 2012, will be a key year in determining what actually happens.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to theelms518@earthlink.net