

“Federation Corner” column  
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## **No to the ITA. Yes to free Ride On.**

By Jerry Garson and Paula Bienenfeld

Last week the Transit Task Force, a creation of County Executive Leggett and Council member Marc Elrich, held a public forum and took testimony regarding the proposal for an Independent Transit Authority. The overwhelming response – again --was, no to the ITA. Again our Civic Federation members turned out and again testified in opposition to the ITA, which would bust our charter. Here is the testimony from Jerry Garson, our hard-working Montgomery County Civic Federation Transportation Chair.

The questions posed to our residents and businesses are, 1. Can significant improvements be made to our current transportation systems, and 2., **Can the residents and business in Montgomery County afford all the proposed costs.** These proposals will result in significant increases in real estate taxes, probably well over 25% and should be disclosed in advance of any proposals being introduced in the State Legislature. The question that needs to be answered is what are the total costs and the related benefits to the current residents. A full analysis of these proposed costs and the benefits has not been performed or provided to the residents and businesses. The proposed BRT bus routes on MD 355, US 29, and Veirs Mill Road would cost \$1.8 Billion with operating costs exceeding \$80 million per year.

In January, the County Executive requested new state legislation that would allow Montgomery County to overhaul the current government structure for providing transit services by creating an independent Transit Authority (ITA) and perform an end-run around our County Charter and the County Charter’s taxing limits.

The bill would create a countywide special taxing district and raise real estate taxes above those allowed by our County Charter. The ITA would be an independent agency run by a five-person board appointed by one person – the County Executive. No oversight of its operations is provided for. It would have its own procurement process, the authority to enter into contracts with other governments and private parties, and take property through eminent domain. (Note: because of the way the subject property has already been assessed, in fact, a ‘quick take’ is possible). It would be neither answerable to, nor accountable to us – the taxpayers and residents. **The authority could build bridges, tunnels, ports, freight or rail terminals, tracks, subways, parking areas, parking structures, and building structures.** This is extremely broad language and should be changed.

Some easier and cheaper alternatives are possible.

One. **Provide free Ride On bus services**, which would provide more mobility and cost less than 10% of the cost of the BRT lines proposed. The cost last year would have been \$22 Million. Next year it probably would be \$23 Million. This is the amount of fare contribution made by riders.

Two. Another proposal, reported in the Bethesda Beat, is Premium Bus Service. The Beat said, “Montgomery County officials think they have a good shot at getting federal funding for a ‘premium’ bus

route that would run with all-electric vehicles along some of the most congested portions of Rockville Pike.”

Gary Erenrich, the County’s Acting Deputy Director for transportation policy, said the route would have 14 buses that would provide more frequent service with fewer stops between Lake Forest Mall in Gaithersburg and the Grosvenor-Strathmore Metro station in North Bethesda. The bus route would cost a total of \$21 million. A duplication of the Maryland Route 355 Bus Rapid Transit operation.

In the Official Statement dated May 1, 2012, for the Montgomery County, Maryland Parking System Project Revenue Bonds, the Pledge of Net Revenues is stated, on page 7, and Appendix A has provisions that affect the revenues. Does this pledge permit the transfer of the Bethesda Parking System to the new Montgomery County Independent Transit Authority?

The principal reason for this radical change in the County Government is to finance the construction and operations of the proposed BRT system, but the new ITA would have far-reaching powers that would extend to the creation of bridges, ports, subways, tunnels, and any other related projects if it so desired. The extent of the County government’s control would be limited to the approval of ITA projects in the County CIP budget and provisions in relevant master plans.