

Background

Sam Schwartz Engineering (SSE) was retained by the Town of Chevy Chase to examine the MTA's work on the Purple Line Draft Environmental Impact / Alternatives Analysis (DEIS/AA) with emphasis on the segment adjacent to the Town, within the Georgetown Branch Right of Way. SSE has produced an initial report of April 23, 2008, the link to which has been provided the MPAG in a prior e-mail. What follows is staff's initial review of points SSE presented in the Executive Summary of the report. This review was shared with Town of Chevy Chase representatives and SSE at a meeting on May 7, 2008.

SSE Comments from the Executive Summary with Staff Notes (Italics)

Comment #1 – The low-cost BRT option presented by the MTA for Jones Bridge Road lack many generally accepted features of BRT.

There are two other BRT options (medium and high) included in the MTA alternative analysis that have more dedicated or exclusive right of way. The medium and high options are over alignments that follow the master plan (Georgetown Branch alignment). In general, the MTA's approach to include the more extensive BRT alternatives over the master plan alignment is reasonable (i.e., there is established policy for the alignment in this area) and the assignment of the lower cost option to the non – master planned alignment is also reasonable. We think it is consistent with FTA guidelines on the development of alternatives and takes into account the fact that there is a segment of the community that has concerns about the master plan alignment.

SSE's point about the low BRT option not including signal priority treatments is valid. The MTA's own Bethesda – College Park Corridor – Enhanced Bus Improvements includes recommendations for signal priority for what is essentially the TSM alternative for the Purple Line DEIS/AA. There are some constraints with signal priority – especially with respect to cross streets – but the question is a valid one and we should get a response from MTA.

Comment # 2 – Existing and future population and employment are higher along the Jones Bridge Road (JBR) alternative than along the Capital Crescent Trail (CCT). With JBR, more people and jobs will have direct access to the Purple Line. This will make the Purple Line more effective and more attractive to potential riders.

SSE is adding the jobs at the NIH/National Naval Medical and the area bisected by Woodmont Avenue and Rockville Pike north of Cheltenham Drive to make the case that the JBR alignment provides a "one seat ride" from (as an example) the Silver Spring CBD to the Bethesda CBD via JBR and Woodmont Avenue – thereby connecting more people and jobs without the need to transfer. The Master Plan alignment connects the areas (Silver Spring and Bethesda CBDs) of highest density for both jobs and housing over an alignment that provides for a significantly shorter ride time (compared to the JBR alignment) between those two points. The existing Bethesda 8 circulator currently connects part of the Woodmont area in question with the Bethesda Metrorail station with service every ten minutes. This question is largely travel time savings between two points of higher density for both jobs and housing with connecting rail (the

Red Line) vs. longer ride serving more jobs and population with no transfer – it is a questions the model is designed to address (all other items being equal).

Comment # 3 – With a “true” BRT on JBR, overall travel times for a large segment of travelers will be lower than for any of the CCT alternatives, and the construction cost may be up to 70% lower.

This statement generally applies only to trips beginning or ending at NIH/National Naval Medical or the north Woodmont area. Anybody on the Purple Line not destined for NIH/National Naval Medical or the Woodmont area would experience a longer trip with the JBR alignment.

Comment # 4 – Customers will pay a lower fare to reach the Medical Center and NIH via the JBR BRT than with any of the CCT alternatives.

SSE states that this is due to the fact that a transfer will be required and passengers will be required to pay an additional fare. Metrorail fares are currently distanced based. At this point in the process, there is no reason to believe the Purple Line fare structure would be any different than the Blue, Orange, or other lines in terms of the fare structure. The cost of the trip would be less because the distance traveled is less. Conversely, anybody on the JBR alignment not destined for the Medical Center would pay more than they would on the CCT alignment.

Comment # 5 – JBR traffic can be reduced and Purple Line ridership increased with a true JBR BRT.

Again, this statement is applicable only to ridership that begins or ends at NIH/National Naval Medical. It does not mean that Purple Line ridership is greater overall with the JBR alignment.

Comment # 6 – Overall air pollution may be lower for BRT alternatives than LRT.

SSE cites work by Breakthrough Technologies Institute, a non-profit think tank that actively promotes the advantages of BRT. We have not seen the study but the casual observer will want to know that there are organizations that advocate for both modes. One important factor for instance, is to determine what assumptions are used in the study.

Comment # 7 – Federal funds could be jeopardized for failure to consider a reasonable alternative.

The FTA’s evaluation process provides a specific “breakpoint” or threshold for cost-effectiveness. Currently, that threshold is \$23.99 per hour – the variable is cost per hour of transportation user benefit. The MTA is not expected to assign this variable to any alternative until the DEIS/AA is made available. It is difficult to reach any conclusions about the relative cost-effectiveness (and funding potential) of any alternative until this information is made available.

Another aspect of this issue is the selection of a Locally Preferred Alternative. The FTA process does not preclude a locale from selecting an alternative that may have a higher capital cost or a

higher cost-effectiveness breakpoint, relative to other alternatives below the breakpoint. There is still (within the FTA process) very much an element of wanting to know what the community wants – what (when all things are considered) is viewed as the best alternative for community, given its policy and planning goals.

Finally, from the staff's prospective, SSE is noting that federal funds "could" (emphasis added) by jeopardized and that the FTA review "may" (emphasis added) determine the JBR alternative was not fully developed. In our view, this is speculation and when coupled with the potential for jeopardizing federal funding for the project, does not add to a constructive public debate of the issues. A converse (and equally speculative) argument could just as easily be constructed noting that one of the factors the FTA uses to rate projects is the extent to which the local area policies encourage transit supported land use. The JBR alternative is designed to accommodate trips to and from two of the region's largest federal facilities – areas where localities have little or no control with respect to land use policy. The staff believes a more constructive approach is to simply acknowledge the FTA breakpoints, the importance of what the community wants – all things considered, and the need to work toward a financial plan that takes care of our current transit infrastructure (another FTA rating factor of growing importance) as well as the Purple Line and other planned projects.

Comment # 8 – The cost for the High-Investment LRT option is about \$1.8 billion. The cost for an enhanced (but still lowest investment BRT using the JBR may be in the range of \$500 million to \$550 million.

This is somewhat similar to comment # 7 (i.e., it later again questions whether it would qualify for federal funding and is speculative with respect to issues related to cost effectiveness) - so our response is essentially the same.

Comment # 9 – The State of Maryland and local governments must contribute at least 50% of the capital cost of the Purple Line. That share will be \$660 million more for the High Investment LRT vs. the JBR BRT, and then up to \$12 million more in operating costs each year that it is service. Where will that money come from?

Here, the staff believes SSE has a valid point. The region as a whole has some heavy lifting to do with respect to protecting what we have invested and planned for Metrorail as well as the other projects. We do not believe it should necessarily be the single or primary focus of which specific Purple Line alternative is recommended or selected, but it is an issue that needs to be resolved sooner rather than later – most immediately with regard to dedicated Metrorail funding.

Comment # 10 – The trail and bike path will be forced onto the street for over 1/3 mile with the CCT alignments.

SSE is pointing out the limitations of the trail alternatives in the vicinity of the tunnel area and we (the transportation staff) have no substantive comments. There are limitations – advantages and disadvantages to either (or both) routing under the master plan alignment.

Comment # 11 – The Woodmont Plaza in downtown Bethesda would be bisected by a 400 foot by 30 foot storage area.

The Planning Board has approved a project that protects the Georgetown Branch right of way to the point where it meets Woodmont Avenue. While the MTA has not provided details for the tail track design, they have also not stated it will take 400 feet of track. SSE characterization of the tail track as a train storage area is not completely accurate. The area will be used periodically to move trains around. The storage and maintenance area in Montgomery County will be in Lyttonsville. The plan the Planning Board approved accommodates a Woodmont East project before and after the Purple Line – two phases. It is incorrect to imply that the approved Woodmont East plan and the plans for the Purple Line (part of an adopted Master Pan) are in conflict.