Action Committee for Transit

P.O. Box 7074, Silver Spring, MD 20907

TESTIMONY ON GROWTH POLICY
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Summary

ACT believes that the root of our transportation problem is overdependence on automobile transportation. A major metropolitan area that relies on automobiles as the predominant means of travel will inevitably choke on its congested highways. Adequate mobility can only be achieved through a balanced transportation system in which cars, transit, walking, and bicycles all make a contribution. To achieve this, development must be planned so as to make transit, along with walking and bicycling for shorter distances, competitive with the automobile for most trips. We therefore strongly support the Planning Board's new PAMR test. We believe, however, that some modifications are needed in the specifics of the Planning Board proposal:

·A new local area review test is needed.

·Metro station policy areas should be treated separately.

·Metro station policy areas should exit moratorium only by transit improvements

·The "stairstep" test should be replaced with a smooth curve.

·Impact taxes should be drastically reduced near Metro.

We support the PAMR.

Despite the best intentions of its creators, the Adequate Public Facility Ordinance has to date been part of our transportation problem rather than part of the solution. The basic concept of the APFO is to create incentives for developers (and the public agencies they influence) to provide infrastructure that is needed to serve new development. But the APFO measures adequacy of transportation solely by automobile throughput. It thus incentivizes investment in roads at the expense of transit, leading to disinvestment in transit, sprawl development, and degradation of the pedestrian environment.

The proposed new policy-area transportation test, the PAMR, provides a balanced measure of transportation access. When access is insufficient and an area goes into moratorium, it will allow the problem to be fixed *either* by improving automobile mobility or by improving transit access. We enthusiastically support this concept.

A new local area review test is needed.

Local area review affects nearly every development project in the county. It has a much greater effect on the built environment than policy area review, which functions as a general on-off switch. It is therefore essential to quickly develop a new local area test. The council should instruct the planning board to recommend by the end of 2007 a new local area test that balances automobile, transit, and pedestrian/bicycle mobility in the same way as the PAMR balances auto and transit.

Unless the LATR test is changed, the PAMR is doomed to fail. The combination of the old LATR and new PAMR creates a Catch-22 situation. What you do to pass the LATR makes you fail the PAMR, and vice versa. For example, the PAMR encourages improvements to transit speed such as converting curb lanes into "diamond lanes" for buses and turning cars. In heavily traveled transit corridors, reserving road capacity for buses increases the ability of people to move through an intersection. But the LATR counts cars, not people, so the intersection gets a lower score.

Metro station policy areas should be treated separately.

In the Planning Board proposal, Metro station policy areas are lumped into the larger sectors they are part of. For example, the Grosvenor, White Flint, and Twinbrook metro station areas are included in the North Bethesda policy area. Automobile mobility and transit mobility are averaged over the larger policy area, and the areas around the Metro stations go in and out of moratorium at the same time as the rest of North Bethesda.

We believe this is a serious mistake. Transit ridership is much higher near Metro stations than elsewhere, especially at the work end of the trip. The Planning Board's proposal would average pedestrian-hostile areas served by slow buses together with walkable downtowns around the Metro stations. Sprawl development would get a free ride from transit riders in the Metro station areas.

Consequently, we recommend that transit mobility be calculated separately in the Metro station policy areas and in the surrounding policy areas. As for the automobile mobility index,

whether a single average score should be used, or a separate value should be calculated for the Metro station. Arguments can be made for both approaches to auto mobility; we suggest asking the Planning Board staff for advice on this.

Metro station policy areas should exit moratorium only by transit improvements

In Metro station policy areas, transit has been designated as the primary means of accomodating development. These areas should not be allowed to exit a moratorium through road widenings, which unavoidably degrade access to transit. Improvements in transit access should be the only way to exit a moratorium. This requirement will not unduly burden the progress of our downtown centers; if a major transit project is delayed beyond when it is needed, transit access can be enhanced on an interim basis by bus priorities.

Building of new local streets that complete a grid street pattern (such as the extensions of Nebel St. and Chapman Ave. in North Bethesda) should be encouraged in Metro station areas. These streets enhance access for pedestrians as much as for vehicles.

The "stairstep" test should be replaced with a smooth curve.

Transit mobility is calculated in the proposed PAMR as the ratio of transit travel speed to automobile travel speed. The objection has been raised that in this calculation, the transit score gets better if transit speed stays the same when roads get more congested.

This is far-fetched. In the real world of Montgomery County today, transit travel between most origin-destination pairs requires a bus, and traffic congestion holds up buses just as much as cars. It is impossible for transit speeds to remain constant if road travel is slower. When traffic congestion gets worse, the numerator of the transit mobility ratio goes down almost as much as the denominator. The transit score rises only a little for a large fall in the automobile score.

Thus, a large decline in the auto mobility score resulting from increased congestion can bring at most a small increase in the transit score. To eliminate entirely the possibility that this combination would move an area out of moratorium, we recommend that the stairstep-shaped moratorium trigger recommended by the Planning Board should be replaced by a smooth curve.

Drastically reduce impact taxes near Metro.

ACT does not take a position for or against impact taxes in general. However, we believe that any development impact tax should be drastically reduced for projects near Metro.

Karl Moritz of the Planning Board staff reports that research shows development taxes are borne by landowners rather than by developers. He offers the corollary that such taxes therefore will not discourage development.

We have no reason to disagree with the proposition that development taxes reduce the value of land. For undeveloped land, it does follow in principle that such taxes will not substantially change the pace of development.

The economics of redevelopment are very different, however. It only makes economic sense to redevelop a property if the value of the land exceeds the value of the revenue stream generated by the buildings that are now on the property. Suppose, for example, that an aging strip mall is generating $200,000 per year in rents (after expenses). If the land under the strip mall is worth $10 million to a developer, the owner will receive an attractive offer and the property can be redeveloped with more desirable mixed-use buildings; if a development tax reduces the value of the land to $1 million, the strip mall will stay.

We recommend, therefore, that development taxes should be eliminated or drastically reduced in Metro station policy areas. Redevelopment pursuant to the Planning Board's "Centers and Boulevards" initiative should get similar favorable treatment.