

Montgomery County Hides the Ball (and the Money) in Tunnel Project Secret Maps Reveal Plan to Divert Transit Funds

Design drawings disclosed yesterday at a by-invitation briefing show that the Montgomery County Department of Transportation plans to divert tens of millions of dollars in transit funding to a secret project that would build a tunnel for auto traffic under Rockville Pike near Bethesda Naval Hospital, the [Action Committee for Transit](#) has learned.

Diagrams of the tunnel routing, which county bureaucrats have refused to make public, were shown to a small pre-selected group of community residents at a meeting Monday morning. No representatives of transit riders were invited to the meeting. An ACT member, who was in the audience because he had heard about the meeting second-hand, used a cell phone camera to photograph the plans. The secret maps are shown below.

MCDOT officials said at the briefing that they want to use funds designated to improve transit riders' access from Bethesda Naval Hospital to the Metro at Medical Center to build a tunnel for auto traffic beneath Rockville Pike. Metro riders would no longer be allowed to cross the street at surface level. Instead, they would be forced to take a lengthy zigzag route through the tunnel on an underground sidewalk squeezed next to cars, trucks, and buses.

The county DOT asserts that all information about the design of the tunnel is confidential and may not legally be disclosed, leaving riders ignorant of how personal safety would be protected and even whether the tunnel would be lit. Plans for ventilation and protective railings, if any, have also been kept secret. ACT today called on the county to immediately release all information about the plan.

Funding Intended for Metro Riders

Improved access to Metro has long been identified as an important means of solving the transportation problems that will be created by the relocation of Walter Reed Hospital to the Bethesda Naval campus. Through the efforts of the Maryland congressional delegation, the current year's Defense Department budget includes [\\$20 million to build a new Metro entrance](#) on the east side of Rockville Pike, in front of the Navy Hospital.

In July, [a study by the Washington Metro](#) (WMATA) was released. This study compared the costs and benefits of several pedestrian access options: (a) new elevators directly down to the Metro station; (b) a pedestrian tunnel going directly under the road to the existing escalators; and (c) a pedestrian bridge directly across the road.

In ACT's view, the elevator option was clearly best for transit riders, because even a

bridge or tunnel directly across the road would save little time compared to waiting for the traffic light to change. The new elevators would also reduce the time needed to evacuate the station in an emergency; the station falls short of current emergency evacuation requirements and is allowed to operate under a “grandfather clause.”

County Executive Isiah Leggett issued a [public statement](#) endorsing the Metro study findings. “There is a solution,” Mr. Leggett said on August 3, “and we can get it done before the BRAC expansion takes effect in September 2011. We can improve pedestrian access between the Metro station and Navy Med by constructing a new east-side entrance to the Metro station.... What we need now is for the Defense Department to use the WMATA report to make its determination to apply the DAR program to this essential project...”

The Metro study found that the cost of all options would exceed \$20 million, and the county sought additional funding from the U.S. Dept. of Transportation under the economic stimulus program. In a [presentation](#) to the regional Transportation Planning Board (whose signoff is required for the grant) on July 15, the project was described as a pedestrian tunnel. The TPB told the county to leave the elevator option open.

But when the county submitted [its proposal](#) to USDOT on September 15, the project was suddenly neither a Metro entrance nor a pedestrian tunnel. Instead, it was something described as a “multimodal tunnel.” What does this mean? According to the county’s proposal, it’s a secret. All specifics of the plan - even the location and dimensions of the tunnel - were withheld from public disclosure as “confidential business information.” ACT immediately challenged the secrecy in [a Freedom of Information request](#), but under USDOT procedures a long delay is likely before improperly withheld information is made public.

"It is becoming increasingly obvious that MCDOT wants to use money set aside for transit access improvements to fund more road-building, and they know their plan cannot withstand public scrutiny," said ACT President Ben Ross. "They have been hiding this design as long as possible in the hopes that by the time anyone figures out what they are up to and how much it will cost, it will be too late to do anything about it."

The Real Plan Revealed

The county has a two-stage plan. As described in the grant application, the tunnel would first be opened to pedestrians and bicycles only. But the first secret map shows that the tunnel's routing links the internal street network from the NIH and Medical Center campuses, an alignment that serves to provide drivers a connection under Route 355 but takes pedestrians and cyclists well out of their way:



Transit riders would be required, for no apparent reason, to walk north more than 100 feet after leaving the Metro entrance. They would then turn south into the tunnel cross Rockville Pike at an angle, and then double back to the north toward the Navy Hospital.

The reason for this alignment is made clear by the second secret map:



The plan is clear: to divert money intended for transit, pedestrians, and cyclists to build yet another roadway.

Why the Secrecy?

Regardless of legal issues, the secrecy of this project is an affront to Montgomery County's tradition of open and honest government. The very existence of this alternative was kept secret for months, while citizens were wasting long hours of volunteer work in meetings about the Metro study. The citizenry is unable to judge many vital questions about this project:

- What will this project really do to access to the Metro?
- What is the true cost of this project?

- Why is it being kept secret?
- Will the environmental analysis of this project comply with the law which forbids “segmentation” of a project and partial analyses?
- Will this road design undermine the White Flint and Bethesda master plans, which aim to make Rockville Pike and Wisconsin Avenue more pedestrian-friendly?

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