

## **TRANSIT TIMES: THE NEWSLETTER OF ACT**

### **Money for Transit Passes Maryland General Assembly -- Probably**

As *Transit Times* goes to press, the outcome of tax and budget debates in the Maryland General Assembly is still unclear. Transit funding hinges on whether a last-minute compromise can be reached between House and Senate versions of tax legislation.

Earlier, the House had passed a 5 cent gas tax increase along with a gas guzzler tax on the purchase of new, fuel-inefficient automobiles. The gas tax will go into the Transportation Trust Fund and can be used either for highways or for transit. Unfortunately, MDOT currently projects that the portion of the transportation trust fund going to transit will decrease steadily over the next 6 years.

The gas guzzler tax has the added feature of being completely dedicated to public transit funding. Of the \$30 million in transit money raised by the gas guzzler tax (or in some Senate proposals an equivalent amount from a sixth penny on the gas tax), about \$21 million will go to increase the State's share of Metro and Ride-On subsidies in Montgomery and Prince George's Counties.

ACT, the Maryland Transit Coalition and Baltimore Area Transit Association (BATA) led the effort to dedicate some tax funding to transit. Harry Sanders, in particular, gave up many days of work and weekend time to haunt the halls of Annapolis. Several environmental groups (e.g. Chesapeake Bay Foundation and Sierra Club) joined with us when the House Ways and Means committee added the gas guzzler tax to the tax package.

A promise that this funding will prevent further service cuts resulted directly from ACT and MTC activity. At our suggestion, House Deputy Speaker Nancy Kopp wrote to County Executive Potter requesting a commitment to this effect. (See letter on page 3.) Montgomery County Transportation Director Graham Norton responded immediately with a call assuring Kopp that no more service cuts are anticipated.

### **Metro Proposes Fare Increase**

Between March 16th and 25th, WMATA (Metro) held public hearings on proposed fare increases and

rail/bus passes. The fare increases would average 6%. Only 3 people testified on the 16th in Rockville, but about 15 spoke at Metro headquarters on the 25th. Tom Fuchs presented ACT's position objecting to the double whammy of fare increases and service reductions, while also advocating fare simplification. ACT Vice-President Harry Sanders testified on the 25th against the size and scope of the fare increases, while pointing out that for the first time in Metrorail's history ridership is down even though new rail stations have been added.

The two proposed flash passes allowing unlimited rail ridership were eagerly supported. However, ACT did note that the passes only assisted passengers who either regularly made short trips (\$1.50 or less) or took long rides in combination with other rides beyond daily commutes. The truly unlimited passes would cost \$75 with bus fares included, and \$60 without. Both passes would be valid for two weeks.

### **Baltimore Light Rail Opens**

On Friday April 3rd, the Baltimore Central Corridor Light Rail line opened for public service to the Oriole exhibition baseball game at the new Oriole Park at Camden Yards Stadium. This is the first revenue trolley service in Baltimore since street cars stopped running in 1963.

According to the *Baltimore Sun*, 12,600 of the 31,800 fans in attendance at the game arrived by public transit -- 4400 by light rail, 2200 by bus, 5000 by Baltimore Metro, and 1000 by MARC. (By our arithmetic, this is 40% -- the official estimate was 35%.) Unfortunately, our own *Washington Post* did not see fit to mention the opening of the Baltimore light rail line, even though the paper's April 4 edition managed to discuss the automobile traffic into the new ballpark in no fewer than four different places. Perhaps a reflection of the *Post's* attitude toward light rail closer to home.

The MARC train to the game on the Brunswick line attracted only 18 passengers. Does this reflect lack of attention in the local press? Or is the Metro to Union Station more convenient? Or both?

On March 7th, ACT members Harry Sanders, Tom Fuchs, Ross Capon, Ed Frevert and John Carroll were given a preview ride at the region IV annual meeting of the National Association of Railroad Passengers (NARP). The ACT attendees found the trolley ride very

quiet and smooth. It should be an excellent example of how trolleys fit into a suburban setting. It will give Montgomery County legislators an actual operational sample of how light rail could work between Silver Spring and Bethesda.

In April and early May the light rail line will provide service only for baseball games. Regular service will begin mid-May between Camden Station (near Oriole Park and the Inner Harbor) and Timonium. In August the line will be extended south to Patapsco Avenue, while the full southern extension to Dorsey Road, near Glen Burnie, will not open until summer 1993.

## Montgomery County General Plan

Montgomery County is in the process of revising the General Plan of the County, better known as the "Wedges and Corridors" plan. On March 10th the Montgomery County Planning Board held a community workshop on transportation issues of the plan. Several ACT members participated in the workshop which split into three separate groups. Each of the groups felt transit needed greater emphasis along with the environmental impact of new roads. Other common themes were the need for better implementation of transportation projects as well as more cross-county transit.

On March 30th the Montgomery County Planning Board reviewed revised objectives (and the strategies to meet these objectives), which were developed by staff members based on input from citizens and groups in the earlier March 10th meeting. ACT members attending the March 30th meeting were impressed by the attention members of the planning board gave to all transit issues.

## Ride-on Forums

On March 25, Ride-On held forums to receive public comments on several route changes. These would involve route consolidations in the Wheaton area, and some routes changes and new services in the Germantown area. In the Wheaton/Forest Glen area, routes 6, 7, and 26 would be combined into a single route. This new route would continue to go from Grosvenor to Wheaton but the route would be very circuitous, going through the Forest Glen station and down Inwood Avenue.

ACT noted that ridership has declined on route 26 mainly because the number of bus runs was reduced. If service was restored or even increased, the ridership would undoubtedly go up. ACT suggested that route 6 be combined with route 10, that route 7 be extended to Lyttonsville, and that route 26 remain unchanged.

## Upcoming ACT Meetings

April 14 - ACT Executive Board at home of Ross Capon

May 12 - ACT membership meeting

June - trip on MARC to Camden Station and Baltimore Light Rail -- date to be announced (contact Harry Sanders 587-1323)

July 14 - ACT membership meeting

The May and July meetings will be at Silver Spring Center, 8818 Georgia Avenue near Montgomery County Planning Board. The meetings in the fall may be switched to Rockville.

## Silver Spring Sector Plan

On April 9th, the Montgomery County Planning Board will hold a hearing on the Silver Spring CBD Sector Plan. The Plan provides a land-use plan for the central business district of Silver Spring with a main issue being what kind of retail revitalization should occur in Silver Spring-- a regional mall or mini-anchor mall. Transportation and transit also are key elements to the plan since the transportation system will be strained by the additional development.

ACT co-chairman Richard McArdle and Vice-President Harry Sanders will testify in favor of more transit improvements. ACT supports building the Silver Spring-Bethesda trolley, increasing MARC service, moving the Silver Spring MARC station near the Metro station, reducing transit fares to build Wheaton-Silver Spring ridership, and building a transit-way in the US 29 corridor.

## NIH Expansion

The National Institutes of Health are planning a new building near the Medical Center Metro station to consolidate offices now scattered throughout Bethesda and Rockville. Unfortunately, current plans for the building include an 1800-car underground garage to provide free parking to NIH employees.

ACT vice-chair Ben Ross testified at a public meeting and wrote to Sen. Barbara Mikulski to urge that the parking garage be deleted from the plan. He pointed out that this garage will maintain a ratio of nearly 0.5 parking spaces per employee at NIH, while the County Planning Board has recommended that this ratio be reduced to 0.4. Community groups near NIH were unanimous in joining ACT's opposition to the parking garage at the public hearing.

## Earth to Annapolis: Counties Need the Power to Tax Gasoline

by Ross Capon, ACT Co-Chair

At every turn, we hear government cannot do things once taken for granted. A few years ago, a prominent state legislator told an ACT meeting, "With light rail, you're really on to something!"

Today, the most promising prospective Montgomery County light rail line is on... a siding, waiting for the day when the county executive believes we need light rail "now" and a governor revives Gov. Schaefer's now-void offer to fund the project. Perhaps even while some of us are still alive.

One legislator recently told me to take heart because of what the Clean Air Act and the new flexible highway law will allow. Maybe.

For now, though, Planning Board staff is seriously working to -- get this! -- *add a lane to Georgia Avenue between the Beltway and 16th Street...* making it easier for people to drive their cars above our expensive new subway line.

And gasoline prices continue to fall -- regular at Georgia Ave. and Randolph Rd. was \$1.039 a gallon on March 32, ten cents cheaper than Nov. 8. That 9% drop would be even greater if you adjust for inflation. Indeed, in real terms, gasoline costs less here today than it did 40 years ago.

By international standards, the gasoline taxes we pay or are

likely to pay are obscenely low and the rail transit network we support is obscenely tiny and underutilized. The gasoline *tax* is about \$3 a gallon in Italy, \$2 in Japan, and well over \$1 in Great Britain and West Germany. Our federal tax is 14 cents; New Yorkers pay state taxes totaling 30 cents; Marylanders pay 18.5 cents now, 23.5 cents proposed.

Also "quaint" by international standards is our policy of earmarking most gasoline tax revenues for highways. In Great Britain and the Netherlands only 25% of gas tax monies go to highway programs; in most other European countries only about 33%.

Meanwhile, *our* politicians still talk about the need to get people out of their cars and still vote to raise transit fares.

The following letter was sent by Del. Nancy Kopp to County Executive Potter on March 30. As discussed on page 1, Del. Kopp quickly received a positive (if somewhat vague) response from MCDOT Director Graham Norton.

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March 30, 1992

The Honorable Neal Potter  
County Executive, Montgomery County  
101 Monroe Street  
Rockville, Maryland 20850

Dear Neal:

I recently had a telephone call from Mr. Ben Ross, a member of the Maryland Transit Coalition. He wanted to make it very clear to me that the members of that Coalition supported the "gas guzzler" tax.

Mr. Ross indicated that his members believed passage of such a tax should be contingent on a written commitment from the County Executives that direly needed transit services will be continued.

The members of the Coalition from Prince George's and Montgomery Counties believe that sufficient cuts in services have already been made. They are concerned about the public's perception of elected officials who would pass this tax and then turn around and make additional cuts in service.

Please let me if such an agreement has been considered and/or executed. Since the Session is moving quickly, would you please either FAX a response (301) 558-3850 or ask a member of your staff to call my office.

Thank you for your help in this matter.

Sincerely,

*Nancy*  
Nancy K. Kopp

Why is the legislature so timid about increasing the gasoline tax and earmarking most of it for transit and for non-transportation purposes?

Because our politicians believe the public thinks cheap gasoline is more important than providing desperately needed transit improvements, more important than keeping Montgomery County libraries open the week after Christmas, more important than providing school "amenities" such as activity buses that enable kids in extracurricular activities to go home late.

Ours may be remembered as the society that sacrificed everything for cheap gasoline. In the March 30 episode of the TV show "Northern Exposure," someone observed that human beings are basically "monkeys with car keys." That's truer than many of us care to think!

It's silly for Montgomery County to have an "energy tax" that doesn't apply to gasoline. *At the very least, the legislature should let counties impose their own gasoline taxes.* Then counties like Montgomery with good public transit and the potential for more would not have energy policy held hostage to rural counties with minimal public transportation or potential for same.

How's that for good government? Bring an important power closer to the people!

The public is ready to listen to common sense from legislators or council members. The public is ready to accept a stiffer gasoline tax with the right explanations, along the lines suggested above. Do we want kids to spend the *entire* Christmas vacation at the mall so we can close the libraries and enjoy cheap gasoline? Will *your* legislator start the ball rolling?

## Maryland Transit Coalition

The Maryland Transit Coalition initiated last fall has grown and has contributed to the push for transit in this year's legislative session.

The Coalition's main accomplishments over the past three months have been the selection of a list of priority transit projects for Maryland, establishing a modest presence in Annapolis during the legislative session, and developing a broader base within the environmental movement.

The Coalition has now developed a small but diverse core group of committed activists from both environmental and transit organizations. There has also been participation from the Metro employees' union.

In February, a list of seven priority transit projects, among them construction of the Silver Spring-Bethesda trolley, was approved by the Coalition. The list also included MARC extension to Frederick, restoration of service cuts, new equipment for MARC, studies of rail options on all commuter corridors, bicycle parking at transit stations, and planning of an east-west rail line through Baltimore. This list was distributed to all members of the legislature and widely circulated among environmentalists.

The true effectiveness of a lobbying and public information effort like this is always hard to judge. But the amount of attention paid to transit in this legislative session, despite the overwhelming pressure of tax and budget problems, suggests that we have had a real impact. Perhaps our only effect has been to remind legislators of their past verbal commitments to transit, but if we have succeeded in turning words into action that is no small accomplishment.

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*The Action Committee for Transit is a Montgomery County based citizen's group supported entirely by the contributions of our individual members, most of us regular transit users. For more information about meetings, activities, or joining ACT, write us at P. O. Box 7074, Silver Spring, MD 20907, or call Paul Goldman (585-7040).*