

## HIGH GREEN

consider alternatives to the planned Purple Line light rail system proposed to serve Montgomery and Prince Georges counties, including Metrorail stops at Bethesda, Silver Spring, College park, and New Carrollton.

In an interview with the *High Green*, Mr. Carr described his group meeting at the agency as cordial but non-committal. The discussion on March 22 was with Susan Borinsky, FTA Associate Administrator for Planning and the Environment. The delegate said his constituents included residents at or near the old Georgetown Branch in Montgomery where some neighborhood unrest has focused on the issue of whether the rail service would disrupt a walking trail. Rail backers have made efforts to mitigate that concern.

While Carr's district also includes the Columbia Country Club, he told this column he "had not heard from them." The club's golfers have argued that the light rail operation would disrupt their green space. The representative said his delegation visiting FTA included "all kinds of people" in the county.

The Montgomery County Democrat whose district includes portions of Chevy Chase and Kensington, focal points of the sharpest controversy over the Purple Line, said there are rules that are in the making and that likely will be "modified" before an absolute final decision is made on issues that will determine whether the light rail project goes forward as desired by its supporters. Carr opposes the Purple Line as planned, and believes the Jones Bridge Road Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) idea is among the alternatives that have not been adequately considered. BRT, he said, has not been "fully explored."

Delegate Carr told us it would be "a missed opportunity" if the Jones Bridge route is not considered more thoroughly. He noted that line would serve the Naval Hospital that will be expanded when Walter Reed Hospital is shut down and moved to the Montgomery County location. The 18<sup>th</sup> District lawmaker said the surroundings of the naval facility have been marked by "ill-considered road improvements and [inadequate] transit planning."

Mr. Carr also applied the "poor planning" description to those at the state level who have taken some criticism for shorting on Maryland's share of Metro money just at a time when the rapid rail system is facing a funding crisis. "We should focus on [adequate] Metro funding," he said. (It is believed that Maryland's falling short on Metro dollars can be traced in part to highway spending. (See below.)

When asked by this column to comment on Delegate Carr's remarks, Ben Ross, longtime President of Montgomery County's Action Committee for Transit (ACT), replied as follows: "Why does Rep. Carr think we should pay for Metro's expenses by robbing other needed transit projects, when people are driving less, and yet we are still pouring billions of dollars into highway expansions?"

Montgomery County is awaiting a federal green light to go ahead with the Purple Line as backed by Governor O'Malley. The light rail version has the support of the county government, county planners, and the National Capital Region Planning Board.

### **Metro Funding Impasse (again)**

As of this writing, a pro-Metro blogger is accusing Maryland Governor Martin O'Malley of "sabotaging" Metro service by holding back money for Maryland's share of contributions to the agency's requirements. Further

### **WES VERNON ON THE RAILS**

**Rail Service in Washington – One Step at a Time:** Maryland Delegate Alfred Clinton Carr, Jr. and interested constituents have met with a top official of the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) urging that the agency

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outrage was expressed when it was reported that the WMATA Board was accepting the holdback and accordingly trimming the budget. That this apparently cuts into Metro's capital expenses (which in turn goes to the timely and highly volatile issue of safety) is the basic cause of displeasure of the Board's seemingly passive stance on being shortchanged.

This comes on top of a story by crack transportation reporter Kytja Weir at the *Washington Examiner* that Governor O'Malley had moved to cut back on Metro's maintenance spending, affecting such projects as canopies over rail entrances that would (hopefully) alleviate the problem of chronically out-of-order escalators; allowing riders to pay directly with bank cards; reduction in space for Metro police stations, etc.

Some Metro backers believe that O'Malley and the Maryland legislature, in this instance, have sacrificed rail transit on the altar of highway transport; that the cutbacks were forced by the expenditure of transportation funds for the Inter-County Connector (ICC) boondoggle and an extra lane on I-95.

The biggest fear is that Maryland's cutback action will lead the other jurisdictions to do likewise, as the *Washington Post* put it, "to maintain equity in the current funding formula." If that happens, the agenda could end up losing about a half billion dollars.

And in Sunday's *Washington Post* (5/2), Maryland DOT Secretary Beverly Swaim-Staley Hanover wrote that the state will deliver for Metro when the money is actually needed, but that with Maryland's many immediate monetary needs, "to divert money from those worthy projects to sit idle in a bank account [for about a year] would be a drag on the regional economy."

### **WMATA vs. Night People (Again)?**

As we go to press, WMATA was seriously considering cutting back by one hour the post-midnight weekend service on Friday and Saturday nights (or Saturday and Sunday mornings to be technical), shutting down at 2AM instead of 3AM. This was one of several steps the agency was pondering to close the funding gap in its budget.

Much of the Metro brass has long had a hang-up about extra hours for night-owls. A few years ago, in response to popular demand, WMATA started running the weekend trains until 1AM, then later until 2, and finally until 3, as at present.

As a transportation rep for my neighborhood, I testified at a WMATA hearing April 1 in Rockville, and opined that this world capital does not roll up its sidewalks at sundown and that the trains should continue rolling until 3AM on those weekend evenings.

This was in response to a Metro proposal to charge rush-hour fares between midnight and 3AM on those late nights. If the volume of ridership during those witching hours justifies imposing a rush-hour extra fare, I said, then by all means, go ahead with it. Otherwise, it serves no purpose other than to discourage the late-night ridership. I asked if someone deep in the bowels of Metro was deliberately trying to reduce patronage so as to provide justification for ultimately eliminating the post-midnight schedules.

Board Chairman Peter Benjamin immediately confirmed my suspicion. He said the reason for trying to hike the fare in those wee small hours was that the late-

night schedules were narrowing an already small window of opportunity for the rail system to do badly-needed maintenance work. "We already have so little time for maintenance as it is," he explained, "and [inadequate maintenance] can lead to unreliable service at other times."

Another board member from Maryland, Gordon Linton (a former Federal Transit Administrator) said it's one thing for New York City MTA authorities to run subways on a 24-hour schedule because they have more than two tracks throughout much of their system (in many cases for express service). Washington has only two tracks for most, if not all, of its mileage.

Benjamin's immediate predecessor as WMATA chairman, Jim Graham of the District, was instrumental in leading the effort to provide late night weekend operations. He has said cutting back the 3AM closing time would be "anathema" to him. Already, workers who are on night shifts at restaurants, bars, hotels, and elsewhere are protesting any such cutback. Some of them do not own cars.

At a regular Metro Board meeting April 29, the discussion centered on a proposed surcharge of \$4 for the post-midnight weekend riders. Graham got his back up on that one. "You're reaching the point where people will take taxicabs," he told his colleagues. Which, of course, defeats the whole purpose of having trains on the "graveyard shift."

### **The "Safety" Factor Post-Midnight**

Then there is another consideration, and this may sound frivolous, but it is reality. Our bars serve booze very late at night and are especially busy on weekends. Do we want to send pie-eyed drivers out on the road behind the wheel because we deny late night transit service? Do we risk upping the DUI-count in the area?

You can argue those people should just go home earlier. Easier said than done. The fact is the post-World War II culture - not just here, but all over America - has provided easier highway/street access without concurrently building up public transportation (until more recent years, anyway). Having already spawned a "wink"-system that says it's OK to drive while "a little over the limit" as long as you don't get caught, would we not make that situation worse simply by yanking the trains at an earlier hour (or really three hours earlier if Metro managers had their way)? More Metro riders would just drive, sober or not.

This is not to argue the case for reckless out-of-control drunks. If they get collared for a DUI, they should have the book thrown at them. But their victims, dead or disabled for life, are the ones who pay the price. Jailing the perpetrator, while justified, won't make the victims whole again.

The first instinct here may be to say OK, jack up the fare after midnight. Let the drunks pay. But minimum wage busboys and waitresses and sober riders in other pursuits would be snared in that cycle as well. The rush hour fare should be imposed only in response to the old law of supply and demand. Using it as a means of implementing an unwritten policy of driving people away (rush hour fares have already prevailed between 2 and 3AM on Metro) is a sneaky way to tackle the question of service vs. maintenance. (And by the way, is that a false choice or not? I don't have an immediate answer.)

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This writer has pondered Chairman Benjamin's explanation, coupled with our support for immediate past Chairman Graham's push for the extra hours. What we need is an honest open public discussion of the dilemma, not a concerted effort to price people away from the system we paid so dearly to build.

### **Harry Sanders (RIP)**

July 25, 1998, the day Metrorail finally arrived at Glenmont, marked the successful end of a quarter-century effort in my neighborhood to bring the service to our community. Accordingly, to mark the occasion, this writer decided to ride the first train leaving from and the first to arrive at the new terminal.

In order to manage that, I had to exit the *departed* train at Wheaton, cross the platform there in order to meet and board the train that was to be first *arrival* at the Glenmont facility.

Upon boarding the returning train at Wheaton, there in the first car, standing at the very front door near the motorman's cab, were Harry Sanders and his wife Barbara. They had boarded at Silver Spring. Together we had a forward view of the newly carved tunnels under Georgia Avenue (so brand new as to be even much less dingy than one would expect of a subway tunnel) as we proceeded to the opening ceremony scheduled at Glenmont.

It is no surprise to me that Harry would want to be a part of that historic occasion. After all, he had been instrumental in just about every concerted effort over a period of decades to make Montgomery County more transit-friendly.

Harry Sanders, who passed away March 10, was honored at a fundraiser for the Purple Line the night of March 22 in Silver Spring. Barbara was there to accept an award and listen to accolades accorded her husband at a well-attended event in his memory. One suspects that losing a beloved spouse would be an emotional loss that must be experienced in order to be fully understood. For Barbara that night, there was much empathy in the room. And for Harry, there were the fondest of memories, for some in attendance, perhaps going back to nights in his living room when campaigns for Montgomery County's transportation betterment were launched. Barbara Sanders has described her husband of 33 years as "a mild Midwestern man." Mild-mannered, yes, and also principled and dedicated to the rail transit cause.

Harry Sanders is remembered in many quarters as the father of the Purple Line. There was perhaps some irony as to the timing of the Purple Line fundraiser in his honor. It was earlier that same day that the meeting had taken place downtown at the FTA/DOT (see above) by some who still hope to derail the project. Harry is gone, but the battle lives on. As was obvious on March 22, forces on both sides remain committed. The project's success, when it comes, will be in large part due to the tireless efforts of Harry Sanders. *Wes Vernon*