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## Ehrlich drawing the line

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Staff Writer

Country club is off limits to trolley,  
governor says

Activists and officials accused Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. this week of choosing the needs of wealthy golfers over those of working-class commuters in declaring he will never allow a transit line to cross the grounds of Columbia Country Club.

"It will not go through the country club," Ehrlich (R) said in an interview with The Gazette last week, referring to the Inner Purple Line trolley that would link the two sides of the Metrorail Red Line in Montgomery County, and eventually connect to stations in Prince George's County.

Trolley supporters said the governor's statements come as no surprise, but do cast light on a connection they have long suspected to exist between the governor and the exclusive club where Ehrlich has been spotted playing at least once.

"It's an enormous statement," said Ben Ross of Bethesda, president of the Action Committee for Transit. "It just sweeps away all of these years of pretense that it's all about the [Capital Crescent] Trail. We've always maintained this wasn't about the trail, but about the country club. This forces the issue out into the open."

For months, Maryland Transportation Secretary Robert L. Flanagan has couched the Ehrlich administration's skepticism about the downcounty transit project in terms of its impact on the Capital Crescent Trail, not the golf course.

On Tuesday, however, he conceded Ehrlich has a soft spot for the sport. "The governor happens to love golf," Flanagan said. "So he would tend to be a little more focused on the beauty of a golf course. I am probably a little more focused on the trail."

Ehrlich's statements come even as the Maryland Transit Administration wraps up its study of the Inner Purple Line, which now includes both the trolley proposal and an alternate busway proposal put forth by Del. John A. Hurson (D-Dist. 18) of Chevy Chase. The busway has failed to garner much public support, but unlike the trolley line, it would use existing roads and avoid the country club.

"We feel very confident the [busway] alternative is going to be very strongly competitive," Flanagan said.

Flanagan said he has never received direct instructions from the governor regarding the Purple Line study. Regardless of Ehrlich's statements about the country club, Flanagan said his department will complete the study of the trolley line. "In terms of state resources, the money's already spent," he said.

After more than a decade of debate, the Purple Line quickly gained momentum when Ehrlich's predecessor, Gov. Parris N. Glendening (D), endorsed the plan and launched the state study of it in 2000. But the project has remained mired in controversy because it would run on part of the popular Capital Crescent Trail and cut through the exclusive golf course and several Chevy Chase neighborhoods.

Image

He wants to protect wealthy golfers over ordinary commuters, and that's his choice," Leventhal said.

Prince George's County Council Chair Peter A. Shapiro (D-Dist. 2) of Brentwood agreed.

"I think it's been the problem all along," he said. "The needs of a group of wealthy people seem to take priority over the needs of the most transit-dependent people in the State of Maryland. Frankly, the moment Ehrlich got elected, the future of the Purple Line was in peril. He's made it clear it's not his priority."

Despite Ehrlich's statements, Flanagan maintained that the real priority of the administration is preserving the Capital Crescent Trail, not the country club.

"We have gone through this process step by step, and I can guarantee you the golf course has not been a major fact in the secretary of transportation's analysis of what we are doing," Flanagan said. "In my mind, the golf course is the incidental beneficiary of the fact that you can't save the Capital Crescent Trail without also protecting the golf course."

But Ed Asher, president of Chevy Chase Land Company, said Ehrlich is jeopardizing trail by stonewalling the Inner Purple Line.

Asher said his company owns about 12 acres of the trail, running from Jones Bridge Road east through Columbia Country Club in Chevy Chase, to the vicinity of the Air Rights Building along East-West Highway in Bethesda.

Montgomery County has held easement rights to the property since 1985 under the federal Rails-to-Trails Act. But those rights end, Asher said, if the county fails to use the land for mass transit.

"If there is a definite act, on the part of this or another administration, that the trail will not be used for rail, we will go back to court to try to reclaim ownership," he said.

If successful, Asher said his company could develop the land.

Pam Browning of Chevy Chase, who led a petition drive last summer to preserve the trail, said Asher and his fellow light-rail supporters are muddying the issue.

"Light-rail proponents, supported by Chevy Chase Land Company, would like to see the issue of the trail disappear," she said. "They have long claimed that the Country Club is their only opposition. But community residents and trail users know otherwise."

*--Staff Writers David Abrams and Thomas Dennison contributed to this report.*