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Wednesday, Oct. 22, 2008

Columbia Country Club in talks over Purple Line

All transit options meet federal standard for cost effectiveness, state says

by Douglas Tallman | Staff Writer



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This story was updated on Oct. 22, 2008, from its print version.

The Columbia Country Club, which had been part of efforts to keep a transit link out of Chevy Chase, is reportedly working with state officials on a change to the route or a land swap so the project can move forward.

The development was part of a presentation Tuesday by Michael D. Madden, project development chief for the Maryland Transit Administration, before the Montgomery County Council on the Purple Line, which would connect Bethesda and New Carrollton with buses or light rail.

But a spokesman for the country club said the discussions with MTA could not be construed as a negotiation.

MTA asked to meet with Columbia's officers to discuss the potential adverse effects from the transit link, said Geoff Gonella of Kensington, a member of the club's board of governors.

"We think there are serious concerns with the project, and none of this has changed. What we're hearing from MTA, their engineers and architects, has not changed that," Gonella said Wednesday morning.

Although the Purple Line has broad support, local residents have differed on the route. Town of Chevy Chase officials have pushed for the Purple Line to follow Jones Bridge Road, avoiding the community and the Capital Crescent Trail. That alignment also avoids downtown Bethesda, where the transit line is expected to get many of its riders.

One alternative follows the right of way from the old Georgetown Branch trolley, now part of the Capital Crescent Trail. County Councilman Roger Berliner quizzed Madden on MTA's plans for the trail. Madden's four-color, 53-page report depicted a wooded trail with fine landscaping separated from Purple Line vehicles by a fence.

Berliner (D-Dist. 1) of Potomac said the report is a representation of what people will expect from the trail after the Purple Line is complete.

"We can't have a bait and switch with something this fundamental," Berliner said.

But Councilman George L. Leventhal said the time for squabbling had past.

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"If we can't get behind this inclusive process that MTA has set before us, we'll lose it all," said Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park. "We need to pull together to support the Purple Line now."

The state is weighing several possibilities for the Purple Line. A draft report released last month considers three possibilities for light rail and three possibilities for dedicated bus lanes. The report also considers a "no build" option as well as greater management of existing bus routes.

Even the most expensive light-rail option, estimated at \$1.6 billion, falls within federal guidelines for cost effectiveness, Madden said.

Dedicated bus lines would cost between \$386 million and almost \$1.1 billion, according to the September report. The federal government will bear about half the cost of whatever is built.

Ridership increases with more expensive options, reaching 68,100 a day with the \$1.6 billion light-rail plan. Travel times decrease, too. The report estimates, using congestion estimates for 2030, that a trip from Bethesda to the University of Maryland would take 81 minutes by car and 30 minutes with the most expensive light-rail option.

Hearings have been scheduled for 4:30 p.m. Tuesday, Nov. 18 at the National 4-H Youth Conference Center in Chevy Chase and 12:30 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 22 at the Montgomery College, Takoma Park campus. Gov. Martin O'Malley (D) will write federal officials of an ultimate decision around the end of January, Madden said.

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