



Network and Methodology Report - Countywide Transit Corridors Functional Master Plan: Roundtable Discussion

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Description

This roundtable discussion is a follow-up to the Planning Board’s review of the Network and Methodology Report on December 15, 2011. At that meeting the Board expressed a need for additional information. This discussion is the first of two that we anticipate scheduling in advance of worksessions in February on the proposed network and methodology, at which actions will be recommended to complete the work started in December. At this roundtable, we would like to discuss the purpose of the BRT network, the design year we should be considering, and the link between this Functional Plan and land use. (The staff memo and report for the December 15, 2011 meeting may be found on

http://www.montgomeryplanningboard.org/agenda/2011/documents/20111215_NetworkMethodologyReportBRT_md_final_000.pdf.)

Purpose of the BRT Network

As noted in the report, both on page 1 and in Appendix A, a BRT network would be consistent with the General Plan recommendations to increase transportation alternatives and provide a framework for development. Beyond that, does the Board see the purpose of this network as:

- Transforming how people travel around the county or just providing a better alternative for those who take transit?
- Promoting economic development per current Master Plans or encouraging a different type of development pattern in the county?
- Accomplishing other purposes not noted above?

Design Year Considerations

The BRT network has the potential to move transit passengers on our major highways and arterial roads much faster than current service, but who are those passengers?

Near Term

- Are they largely existing transit passengers whose travel time we would like to shorten?
- Are they also county residents who currently drive alone? If so, are we providing them with a choice to take transit as a desirable alternative, or are we providing a service that some drivers must take in order for our roadways to remain at an acceptable level of congestion?
- Are they also non-county residents that we would like to intercept before they reach the more heavily developed areas of Montgomery County? If so, are we promoting smart growth by freeing up our roadway capacity to serve our own planned development, or are we promoting sprawl by enabling people live farther away from their jobs with the same travel time?

Future

- What design year should we be using? The report that Parsons Brinkerhoff prepared for the County was compiled using 2040 ridership forecasts. If we go beyond this design year, what design year should be used and how should judgments be made as to what network is appropriate?
- Are future BRT patrons generated by:
 - land use in current Master Plans for a specific design year (2030 or 2040),
 - the projected build-out of current Master Plans, or
 - beyond the scope of adopted plans? If so, how should we determine the amount of land use to model?

Master Plan Requirements – the link between transportation and land use

The countywide BRT network recommended by the Board should be based first on the existing and forecast ridership and land use. Because of the potential importance of this network to the County's future growth, the forecast land use may be reasonably extended to the maximum build-out of existing Master Plans, rather than the using the 2040 design year, and for study purposes may consider the proposed land use in Master Plans that are currently in our work program. We are already at the outer limit of growth anticipated in the 1964 General Plan however, and our current forecasts show that the ridership that would be generated by the land use recommended in current area plans does not justify requiring the right-of-way needed to accommodate the full BRT network currently recommended by the Rapid Transit Task Force.

The 1964 General Plan states on page 142: *"Efficient rapid transit depends on relatively few highly traveled routes supported by closeness of residences and businesses to its stations, frequent service, fast and comfortable equipment. It is only under these conditions, found in the corridor pattern and to a somewhat lesser extent in the satellite pattern, that rapid transit will be attractive to a large enough number of people so that the insatiable need for highways can be brought under control."*

The 1969 Updated General Plan includes in its Circulation section (pages 19-21):

Objective A: Transportation routes and facilities should be used not merely to accommodate travel demand, but more importantly, to facilitate the orderly growth of urban areas within the context of general plan goals.

Guideline 5: In locating major transportation routes in built-up areas, minimize the disruption of local businesses and the demolition of sound residential structures.

Objective B: Provide for a coordinated rail-bus transit system that is as capable of shaping desirable growth patterns as it is in serving present population and employment centers, and provide for convenient ease of transfer between transit and other modes.

Guideline 3: Explore the feasibility of exclusive bus-ways where rail transit service cannot economically be extended because of low projected passenger volumes.

Objective E: While providing adequate capacity through built-up urban areas, retain the liveability and amenities of such areas.

Guideline 1: Encourage the use of mass transit rather than the use of the automobile for travel through built-up areas.

While the General Plan passenger volume thresholds for designating bus lanes are not as stringent as for rail lines, the large number and extent of the corridors included in the task force's recommended BRT network far exceed the "relatively few highly traveled routes" noted in the 1964 Plan.

As we noted in our memo for the December 15th discussion, the 1993 General Plan Refinement of the Goals and Objectives supports the development of a BRT network (excerpts from that plan are included in the report). But as the above citations from the 1964 General Plan and 1969 Update demonstrate, there are qualifications to that support:

Transportation facilities are intended first to serve planned land use rather than just meeting travel demand: During the development of the Corridor Cities Transitway (CCT), it became clear that a stronger case could be made for construction of this facility with increased forecast transit ridership. The recently adopted Germantown and Great Seneca Science Corridor (GSSC) Master Plans include average station densities generally recognized as 'transit supportive'. This was not necessarily the case prior to the adoption of these plans. The proposal for a BRT network or infrastructure in areas that do not have planned 'transit supportive' densities needs to be presented in that context. It is that conflict that is at the center of the issue of the appropriate design or horizon year. The potential for conflict can be avoided in White Oak because that Plan is underway and is on the same timeline as this Functional Plan.

Planning for a BRT network must consider the impacts on adjacent properties: The impacts would be far more wide-ranging on other parts of the BRT network because of the number of corridors under consideration and because the land ownership pattern along these existing roadways is at a much

smaller scale – many of these corridors have long stretches of single-family homes that could be affected. Designating wider rights-of-way would protect these future transit corridors, but there would be no immediate opportunity to balance the right-of-way impacts with land use recommendations that could be beneficial to affected property owners since a Functional Plan cannot change land use.

Transit is given a higher priority over automobiles in urbanized areas: The issue of how we should create the new bus lanes we need - whether by repurposing existing travel lanes or by building new lanes – will be explored in greater detail in our next roundtable discussion, but our view is that the General Plan supports using existing pavement rather than widening roadways in our more densely developed areas.

The cost of the proposed BRT network should also be considered when we have that information available. We do not typically have detailed discussions about costs of all recommendations as part of our Master Plan work, but the County Executive’s staff does perform a cost analysis as part of their review in advance of the Council’s review. The costs of larger items however, such as interchanges and transit facilities, are considered by the Board. For example, the decisions on the Purple Line and Corridor Cities Transitway were based on Federal Transit Administration cost effectiveness guidelines that take into account both costs and ridership forecasts. There was also much discussion during the writing of the Staging Amendment for the GSSC Master Plan about how much transportation infrastructure could be afforded at each level of development. The likelihood of the County being able to afford to build and operate such an extensive BRT system is an important consideration in weighing the impacts on existing development.

Summary

The scope of the BRT network that we can recommend in the Countywide Transit Corridor Functional Master Plan at this time is constrained by the land use recommended in current area Master Plans since they include more growth than the General Plan and a Functional Master Plan does not include a land use component.

Other scenarios with land uses not in our current area Master Plans can be tested to determine the feasibility of a more extensive BRT network, with adequate time and resources as discussed on December 15th. With this information, **it would be possible to develop a two-tiered approach to a recommendation for a BRT network.** A recommendation based on land use in current Master Plans can be made for a BRT network to be included in the Countywide Transit Corridor Functional Master Plan. A more extensive BRT network could be identified as worthy of pursuing should additional development density be approved in future area Master or Sector Plans, since this Functional Plan will amend the General Plan.

We request that the Board provide us direction as to how we should address these issues.

Next Steps

We anticipate that an additional roundtable discussion will be held on January 19, 2012 to discuss transit corridor functions, repurposing travel lanes as bus lanes, and the impacts of various levels of treatment on a sampling of corridors. Following these two roundtable discussions, we anticipate receiving the Rapid Transit Task Force consultant's report on a preliminary design for an interim BRT network with a cost estimate. We will include a review of this report in our memos for subsequent worksessions at which we will request the Board's recommendations on the BRT network and methodology.