

Myths and Misperceptions Regarding the MDOT Plan for Expanding I-270 and I-495

This paper challenges the key myths surrounding the Governor's highway expansion plan. It raises critical questions about key financial covenants between the State and the project developers, and about air pollution and climate changes, that have been intentionally left unanswered by the state. Good governance requires the Maryland Department of Transportation and the State Highway Administration to provide detailed answers before seriously engaging in what will be the largest public/private partnership for highways ever pursued in the nation. Our goal is to encourage you to demand those answers.

Myth: Congestion on I-495 and I-270 will disappear by adding 2 toll lanes in each direction.

There is no question that both highway I-495 and I-270 are severely congested during rush hour traffic. These roads are mostly occupied by cars carrying only a single passenger. Many of the additional cars entering our roads come from new development that was authorized without regard to the increased traffic on highways that would result.

There is no question that without something changing, congestion will continue and worsen. Were we to add more lanes, more cars would enter the roadways, many car pools would dissolve and more people will flee mass transit and begin to drive the expanded highways. Past experience with highway expansion shows that the roads will eventually become as congested as they are now....but there will be more air pollution from the increased number of cars on the roads, more vehicle noise, more stormwater runoff, and more destruction of the slim forest buffer that separates communities from the highways.

Remember that the last I-270 expansion -- to up to 12 lanes -- was supposed to handle growth in traffic for at least 20 years. But less than 8 years after the project was completed in 1991, I-270 was again completely congested. Why should we expect a different outcome this time?

Myth: The State of Maryland and its taxpayers will not be financially liable if tolls do not cover the needed costs (assuming private financing).

MDOT claims that if the tolls collected are insufficient to cover the expected revenues, then the bondholders will step in and make up the difference and that they alone will be the affected party. It is likely many developers will require the State to provide some assurance of minimum revenues, or the bondholders would demand high tolls to cover the actual costs.

A U.S. DOT report issued in 2016 indicated that many U.S. highway public-private partnership (P3) projects have experienced financial distress due to lower than expected traffic and revenue. The result has been that state agencies often were forced to help absorb traffic and

revenue risk with the attendant budgetary liabilities. MDOT's assertion that they will be divorced from any financial responsibility is doubtful and requires much further study.

Myth: MDOT objectively considered all options before eliminating all mass transit options.

MDOT listed 6 criteria for evaluating each of the 15 potential project alternatives for solving the congested highway issue. In reality, only one criterion was the determining factor in deciding which alternatives would be selected -- whether the alternative had the potential to be financially self-sufficient (and avoid requiring state funds). This criterion forced the rejection of all mass transit solutions.

One of MDOT's criteria was an "environmental" criteria, but its definition of environmental factors did not include traditional impacts such as increases in climate-damaging greenhouse gas emissions and other health-damaging air pollution -- despite the fact that the transportation sector accounts for more carbon emissions than any other sector in the US economy.

Myth: The highway expansion will reduce air pollution because vehicles traveling at 50 mph emit less pollution than vehicles stuck in congested traffic going 5 to 10 mph.

While it's true that vehicles going 50 mpg emit less tailpipe emissions than vehicles stuck in traffic, the amount of air pollution will actually increase because expanded highways encourage more people to drive on them, so an ever-increasing amount of air pollution will result from the increasing number of cars using the expanded highway.

Myth: MDOT has shown transparency and accountability.

The alternatives selected by MDOT show they have not listened to the public nor responded to the comments received. The MDOT has never held a genuine two-way dialogue with the public. Their workshops have only explained their alternatives and their intended process and collected our written comment cards. To date, the 2300 or so comments MDOT has received have been cataloged but were not reflected in the alternatives they selected.

Myth: Highway expansion is the only "concrete" solution to rush-hour congestion

There are other, less invasive and far more cost-effective solutions to our congested highways. Various mass transit alternatives (such as MARC trains, Express Buses and Bus Rapid Transit) can be used in conjunction with existing highways to lessen traffic, better serve low-income residents, and result in far less pollution. A decade from now, we may have autonomous vehicles that can safely expand the number of cars that a highway can handle by allowing vehicles to travel closer to one another, but congestion will still occur in time.

The most pragmatic and cleanest approach is to offer a range of environmentally sustainable transportation alternatives including more mass transit, HOV and reversible lanes, as well as more park and ride locations to facilitate car and van pooling. There needs to be more transit-

oriented development, walkable and bikeable communities, and employers should be encouraged to offer more telework and flexible hours, and incentives for employees to use public transportation.

It should be noted that Montgomery County and the State's plan for handling increased traffic if Amazon had decided to locate its east coast headquarters in Montgomery County was to expand MARC train service and the county Bus Rapid Transit system, including putting BRT on MD 355 (Bethesda to Clarksburg) and on the Corridor Cities Transitway. Why not use that approach now? Also, express buses and BRT could run on I-495 and the Purple Line is expected to have a dramatic impact on reducing traffic on that highway.

Myth: The forest buffer and adjacent properties will remain because the project will stay within the existing road footprint

This fall, Governor Hogan and MDOT said that the expansion will be built within the existing right-of-way and no homes will be taken. MDOT now admits homes and other buildings will need to be taken.

Myth: We need to rush this plan through or Marylanders will pay more

Maryland Transportation Secretary Pete K. Rahn said during a Senate hearing on April 3rd that holding off on soliciting private companies until after the environmental study is finished would delay the toll lane project by at least two years. That would cost motorists \$2.6 billion — \$1.3 billion annually — in wasted fuel, lost time and other costs of congestion, he said, and probably would add \$300 million in construction costs annually to a project expected to cost a private partner \$9 billion to \$11 billion. Any increase in interest rates also could add hundreds of millions of dollars to construction, he said.

However, rushing this reckless plan through without careful consideration of all alternatives also has costs to our neighborhoods, to our climate, our State finances and road congestion.

Myth: The public is powerless to affect the outcome

MDOT has done very little to study key elements of a project that will have major impacts over many decades on the State of Maryland's health, environment, fiscal health and on future congestion, despite the importance of getting this right. There are major flaws in their process — yet checks are starting to be written!

Please demand answers on these and other issues. Add your name to the sign-in sheets or sign-up at www.CABE495.com to receive additional information.