

# Forward, Purple Line

*Maryland officials should unite behind light rail.*

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Since 1986, the Soviet Union has collapsed, two Bushes have been elected to the White House and exactly zero miles of the Purple Line have been constructed in Maryland. For backers of the project, under consideration since that year, it might seem as if it's easier to topple a communist empire than to get 16 miles of transit line built. But -- and we say this with considerable caution -- it seems as if the obstacles that have held up the project are receding and the line, which would connect Bethesda in Montgomery County to New Carrollton in Prince George's County, is closer to becoming a reality.

Recent developments encourage our optimism. In October, a key report found that there are multiple Purple Line routes that would meet federal funding standards while having a relatively minimal impact on the environment. The six-year state study, known as a Draft Environmental Impact Statement, found that bus rapid transit would be cheaper but that light rail would have better ridership numbers and quicker travel time.

Last month, Montgomery County planners endorsed light rail. They found that light rail, which could cost as much as \$1.6 billion, is more cost-effective in the long term and has a greater capacity to handle ridership. They recommended that light rail run along the Georgetown Branch Trail in Silver Spring and Chevy Chase, a path popular with walkers and cyclists. The Planning Board will send a final recommendation to the County Council in coming weeks.

The surge of support for light rail has riled opponents of the route, who contend that rail would disrupt the trail and bring blight to their neighborhoods. They argue that bus transit is a less intrusive option that is more likely to be funded by the federal government. But few projects are as attractive to federal funders as the Purple Line, which would ferry thousands of federal workers and has one of the highest ridership estimates of proposed transit projects in the country.

It's become evident at recent public hearings that community support is coalescing around light rail. The onus is on Montgomery officials and state leaders to support the route. The County Council, which will vote to recommend a route late this month, is expected to overwhelmingly support light rail. The vote is important, as is the intensity with which county leaders lobby state officials behind closed doors. Gov. Martin O'Malley (D) is expected to choose a final route and to start seeking federal funding this year.

If the project is delayed further, it won't be because of a lack of planning or public support -- it will be because of a failure of political leadership. Maryland officials must resist the relentless lobbying of light-rail critics and unite behind the route to present the strongest case for federal funding. Two decades of dithering is long enough.