

FY2027 Capital Budget for Transit

Testimony of Ben Ross

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My name is Ben Ross. I have lived in downtown Bethesda for many years. I am speaking as an individual and not on behalf of any organization.

I am deeply concerned about the path our transportation budget is on. It spends many millions of dollars to add highway capacity. This is a waste of money; it is well established that new highway capacity does not relieve traffic congestion. We have large investments in transit as well, some of them like the new Metro entrances at Bethesda and North Bethesda very valuable. But I fear that the hundreds of millions of dollars of planned bus expenditures will make things worse for the riders.

The proposed budget for Ride-On that is before you has three objectives:

- Building Bus Rapid Transit
- Transitioning the bus fleet away from fossil fuels
- Maintaining the current frequency of service

Frequency of service is what bus riders care about the most. Increasing frequency of service should be the overriding objective when a budget is drawn up. But the budget that is before you doesn't even try to increase frequency, just to maintain it, and even that gets the lowest priority of the three objectives.

Enormous capital expenditures for BRT are proposed. These expenditures will serve little purpose if the operating budget can't provide enough money to run frequent buses. And if there is enough money in the operating budget, the frequent service should start now and not wait for the expensive construction.

Moreover, the misplaced priorities have created a fundamental flaw within the capital budget. Battery-electric buses will start to replace the existing fleet this year. They provide fewer hours per day of service per bus. Beyond that, the BRT investments will serve little purpose unless buses run more frequently than the existing service. The

county plans to use a federal grant to buy hydrogen fuel-cell buses for the Veirs Mill BRT, a technology that has no track record and cannot be relied on without a back-up plan.

But there currently is no place to put the added buses that will be needed. The budget does not schedule the start of construction for a new bus depot until 2030. The new depot will not open until (optimistically) 2032. Unless the county can procure interim bus storage space on an urgent basis, the total amount of bus service in the county will decline over the next two or three years. That will only get worse in the subsequent years if we wait until 2030 to start building the new bus depot.

The new bus depot must be prioritized over BRT. There is plenty of room to cut costs on BRT without hurting the riders' experience. Most importantly, bus-only lanes must be created by repurposing existing pavement rather than widening the roadway. Road widenings are extremely expensive, they induce new traffic that congests adjoining roads, they make the roads less safe for pedestrians, and they violate the county's climate commitments. There's also much room to save money on bus shelters and "branding."

The schedule for procurement of electric buses should also be reconsidered. Battery-electric buses are an immature technology. The current generation of buses has frequent breakdowns and performance degrades as the battery ages. As a result, WMATA and New York City Transit are both pulling back on their commitment to this technology.

I understand that the county police have had similar problems with electric police cruisers. They need frequent charging, and so the police are buying hybrids instead. I also see no mention of electric ambulances in the Fire & Rescue budget. This despite the much greater maturity of the technology for small vehicles.

Electrifying buses does nothing for the climate if it causes loss of ridership and increased car travel. This is especially so when Maryland's incremental electricity demand is being met by burning fossil fuels. The Council should take a look at the county's vehicle electrification policy as a whole, taking into account availability of garage space. The highest priority for electrification should be smaller vehicles and vehicles that would benefit from fast acceleration.

How specifically should the Council adjust the capital budget? High-cost, low-benefit, slow-delivery projects like Observation Drive extended (\$186 million), Phase 1 of the MD 355 BRT (\$517 million), and planning for future highway widenings and BRT projects should be cut. We should invest instead in more modest and more cost-effective projects that will yield results sooner. These include:

- The new bus depot
- Build all Purple Line sidewalks by December 2027
- Increase Bus Priority Minor Projects to several times the current \$500,000
- Add bikeshare docks (\$15,000 each) - our Capital Bikeshare network now lags behind all other jurisdictions, even Fairfax County

Putting priority on frequent service also requires reconsideration of the balance of spending between the capital and operating budgets. This is essential for rational budgeting.

In particular, the current build-first planning model for BRT should be junked. Instead, planning should begin with evaluation of operating frequency alongside route selection. Reallocated PAYGO funds would be used to implement operating frequency increases first. By starting capital budgeting only after the frequency increases, the county can allocate capital investments according to the measured ridership.

I hope I have offered some better ways to spend our scarce transportation dollars. I thank you for the opportunity to testify and wish you the best in your important deliberations.