

MD 355 Corridor Advisory Committee Meeting #16

May 25, 2022

7:00pm – 8:30pm

Held Virtually via Zoom

CAC members in attendance:

CAC members (marked with an “x” if Present)			
Nancy Abeles		Damon Luciano	
Joshua Raymond Arcurio		James Martin	
Peter Benjamin		Jeremy Martin	
Carol Berger		Deborah Michaels	
Paula Bienenfeld		Mark Pace	X
Jay Brinson		Sasha Page	
Eileen Cahill		Era Pandya	
Dennis Cain		D. Todd Pearson	
Jerry Callistein		Susan Roberts	
Steven Cohn		David Rosenbaum	
Barbara Moir Condos		Chad Salganik	
Elizabeth Crane		Cameron Schilling	
Kristi Cruzat		Margaret Schoap	
Nallathamby Devasahayam		David Sears	
Reed Dewey		Peter Shaw	X
Cherian Eapen		Gail Sherman	
Ryan Emery		Eric Siegel	
Greg Ford		Ana Milena Sobalvarro	
Roger Fox	X	Gerard Stack	
Jerry Garson	X	Goke Taiwo	X
Matt Gordon		Michael Tardif	
Peter Henry		Helen Triolo	
Kathie Hulley		Zachary Trupp	
Celesta Jurkovich		Gary Unterberg	X
Peter Katz		Francine Watters	X
Sylke Knuppel		Ronald Welke	
Arnold Kohn		Steven Wilcox	
Anthony Kouneski		Andrew Williamson	
Richard Levine		Paul Yanoshik	
Todd Lewers		Joel Yesley	
John Lin		Damon Luciano	
Richard Lindstrom	X		

Stakeholders and members of the public in attendance:

Jesse Cohn McGowan – Montgomery County Planning Department
Paul Dorr
Tim Goodfellow

Staff in attendance:

MCDOT staff	Consultant team members
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Corey Pitts, MCDOT Division of Transportation Engineering, Planning Section Manager Joana Conklin, MCDOT BRT Program Director Dan Hibbert, Division of Transit Services, Division Chief 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mike Chamberland, Stantec Randy Knapick, IBI Group Andrew Pease, IBI Group Steve Schibuola, IBI Group

Meeting Introduction, Zoom Instructions & Protocol, and Attendee Introductions

Corey Pitts welcomed all attendees and introduced the meeting by briefly covering the following items:

- The meeting format (via Zoom)
- Instructions for using Zoom
- Meeting protocols for Zoom use
- Introductions of the MCDOT team
- Introductions of the consultant team

Meeting Objectives & Agenda Review

Randy Knapick provided an overview of the meeting objectives, which include:

- Updating CAC members on the status of the MD 355 Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) project, including a summary of the timeline related to funding and implementation.
- Summarizing design updates at the 25% design milestone
- Conducting breakout discussion sessions on three separate design topics, including the 25% design plan overview, Montgomery College Rockville – Lot 13 Transit Center, and BRT stations and bike/pedestrian facilities
- Providing CAC members with an opportunity to ask questions and provide feedback.

Project Update

Randy Knapick presented an update of the project status and schedule by covering the following items:

- Project development overview, noting that the project is currently in preliminary engineering.
- Reached 25% design and approaching 35% design.

Corey Pitts provided an update on project funding by covering the following items:

- Voting on County Capital Improvement budget will occur on May 26th, 2022.

- The currently proposed budget funds the Central Phase (Montgomery College-Rockville to Montgomery College-Germantown) for final design and construction; and funds the North (Germantown to Clarksburg) and South (Bethesda to Rockville) Phases through final design.
 - The County continues to explore additional funding sources for North and South Phase construction.

Randy Knapick continued the update on project status and the current work that is underway by covering the following items:

- Recent project activities include completion of the 25% design package in April 2022, continued refinement of transit service and transitway design, and an examination of lane repurposing. The team continues to hold project coordination meetings with relevant stakeholders and agencies.
- A sample of one of the 25% design plan sheets and discussed that the plans are available for review and will be discussed in greater detail during the breakout session to be held later in the meeting.
- The currently proposed BRT service plan was shown for both the full corridor and the initial Central phase of the project.
- Planned BRT running way details by segment and for each configuration under consideration.
- Renderings showing examples of the future FLASH BRT stations in both the median and along the curb.
- An overview of the Montgomery College Rockville – Lot 13 Transit Center design progress, including details about existing conditions and considerations related to the Carver School.
- Overview of Lakeforest area considerations and plans for the mall and transit center location, as well as preliminary design concepts for a new Lakeforest Transit Center to be integrated into the newly developed site.
- Overview of BRT access considerations related to the Shady Grove Metro Station location.
- A summary of ongoing stakeholder collaboration, including BRT station and access considerations, refinement of right-of-way needs, bicycle and pedestrian facility design considerations and refinement, as well as coordination with upcoming development and redevelopment proposals.
- Plans for May and June public outreach efforts to include a combination of in-person, online, and telephone events.
- Details about project website updates.

To conclude this section of the presentation, Randy paused to allow for questions and group discussion:

Q #1:

Participant asked if there is a need for BRT, given the reduction in transit use related to the ongoing pandemic. States that in FY 2022 on weekdays, Ride On Route 55 on the northern end experienced 4,228 riders per day, with 157 trips per weekday with an average of 23.7 riders per trip. Ride On Route 46 on the southern end experienced 1,847 riders per day, with 414 trips per day averaging 16.2 riders per trip. For Ride On Extra Route 101, from Lakeforest Transit Center to Medical Center, there were 2,149 riders per day, with 69 trips per day and an average of 9.1 riders per trip. The total number of riders across these three routes is 6,734 people in both directions. All these passengers could be carried on 85 buses, carrying

80 passengers per bus. The BRT proposal for MD 355 plans to run 20 buses per hour between Lakeforest Transit Center and Shady Grove Metro Station, and 15 buses per hour between Shady Grove and White Flint. The capacity in both directions would be over 5,000 passengers per hour. Based on the Route 29 FLASH BRT buses operating, we estimated over 500 trips per day would be made on MD 355, compared with the 69 trips per day on Route 101. We see that at Shady Grove Metro Station (for WMATA), 3,040 passengers entered in March 2022 and 3,405 entered in April 2022. During the AM period in March, only 1,677 passengers entered and in April, only 1,900 passengers entered. In March, there were 780 vehicles parked at Shady Grove station. We'd also like to note that on I-270, the weekday average vehicle traffic just south of Middlebrook Road was just over 189,000 vehicles per day in both directions. Some of these motorists were probably going to park at Shady Grove. Where will you get the passenger volume to justify the cost of building and running the MD 355 BRT?

R #1:

The local bus service has been holding ridership well during the pandemic. We know that Metrorail ridership levels decreased, but local service has maintained ridership well. We do not plan for worst case scenarios, just like we don't plan for best case scenarios. We do expect ridership to return. Route 55 has almost returned to pre-pandemic ridership levels. We would expect that ridership will continue to return coming out of the pandemic.

Q #2:

Participant asked if the planned BRT would utilize the future extension of Observation Drive to Clarksburg.

R #2:

That was an alignment considered during the planning phase of the project. It was not moved forward as the primary alignment for the project since the extension of Observation Drive was not going to be constructed as part of the BRT project. As Observation Drive gets constructed and extended, it could become a more viable option for the BRT going forward. The plan still holds space for the BRT to operate on Observation Drive. This will depend upon land use changes and what sort of uses ultimately locate on the future roadway. It remains a potential future option.

Breakout Discussion #1: 25% Design Plan Overview

Mike Chamberland provided an overview of the 25% design details by presenting a map/plans for the full corridor, allowing participants to request locations for specific focus.

One participant requested a focus on the Security Lane stop, having a concern about walking distances between that location and White Flint Metro Station. Mike explained that a BRT station is planned for Old Georgetown Road (moved from Marinelli Road due to site conditions), and he expects that North Bethesda BRT would intersect MD 355 at Old Georgetown Road and would facilitate transferring from one BRT to another should be possible at Old Georgetown Road, which is close to White Flint Metro. Also explains that WMATA has plans to create a new station entrance near the intersection of Old Georgetown Road, which would make station access from BRT easier.

A participant expressed concerns that the two BRT projects are not coordinating. Mike explained that coordination sessions are occurring.

Another participant requested to focus on the Downtown Rockville area. Wants to see how BRT would get through Rockville, considering WMATA's current construction there close to the Rockville Metro station. Mike explained the plans for BRT runningway in that area, with a southbound BRT lane.

A participant also requested to view Mannakee Street, thinking about how buses would enter and exit Lot 13. Mike and Corey Pitts explained that a bus-only entrance to the facility is being considered for the area near Ivy League Lane, which would include a new left turn pocket for northbound buses. This is to address operational difficulties at Mannakee. Participant commented that creating additional lanes at MD 355 and Mannakee might be useful.

Another participant asked about the design in the Lakeforest area, wondering if BRT stops in this area will be dictated by what's best for BRT, versus what the developer might want for that location. Corey responded by saying that development plans are still fluid at this point, and that Gaithersburg's Mayor & Council are very supportive of BRT, thinking of it as an important transportation option for their residents and businesses. However, it's too early to tell how BRT and development will be shaped in this area. We are promoting transit as a benefit for that location and important to integrate with the development at that property. Participant hopes that the County is promoting BRT to be an effective and efficient transit option in that area.

Another participant asked a question about a point where buses transition from center-running lanes to side lanes, wondering how the buses will merge over, especially where vehicle queuing to enter businesses may occur. This occurs at an Exxon station at the corner of MD 355 and Dodge Street. Mike responded that buses will not need to merge all the way over to the right lane, and Corey explained that the bus will be able to stay in the left lane until it passes the queuing vehicles entering the gas station. The participant is concerned about volumes at this location, and Corey explained that the project team will explore this further.

A participant asked if there is enough traffic volume south of Rockville to justify implementing a median running way and stations, especially considering White Flint Mall being vacant. Mike and Corey explained that development for that location is expected and is coming, and it makes sense to implement BRT as the area is developing and growing.

Breakout Discussion #2: Montgomery College Rockville – Lot 13 Transit Center

Steve Schibuola provided an explanation of the conditions at Lot 13, the collaboration efforts with Montgomery County Public Schools and the agency's mobility priorities at that location, considerations related to the Carver School and its historic and viewshed-related needs, and how the site is linked with MD 355 and with the main portion of the Montgomery College campus. Steve also introduced Lot 13

design concepts, explaining details about how the Carver School viewshed would be maintained and how both buses and pedestrians would access and circulate within the site.

Breakout Discussion #3: BRT Stations and Bike/Ped Facilities

Randy Knapick presented BRT station and bike/ped facility concepts for discussion purposes.

A participant asked about the station design, wondering if all the stations will have places for people to sit and wait for the bus. Also wonders if there will be provisions for bike parking at the stations. Randy explained that both will be accommodated with benches and bike racks, and that benches would be weather-protected. Randy also explained that there will be a reserved space under shelter for people waiting in wheelchairs.

Another participant asked about the considerations for sidewalk widths. Randy explained that there are several variations to consider, especially regarding right-of-way width and development near the roadway. Mentioned that the Old Town Gaithersburg area is interested in pedestrian improvements in their district. Generally, a very minimum sidewalk width would be five feet, but widths would go up higher than that regularly. Randy also mentioned that in some areas where right-of-way is limited, the impact of widening streets can have severe impacts on adjacent businesses or residences. Participant asked where these areas are, and Randy responded that they include central Gaithersburg and the Twinbrook area as examples.

Another participant asked about transitions, considering cycle tracks and bike lane plans for the entire corridor. Participant stated that drivers often don't expect cyclists to cross lanes of traffic to connect from one bike lane to another. Randy explained that concerns do exist around lane transitions, especially as they commonly occur at intersections. Project team is looking into dedicated signal phases for buses, as well as other strategies that are under consideration. Participant added that wayfinding signage can assist with making these transitions safer for all users.

Summarization of Breakout Discussions

After reconvening the full group of participants, Mike Chamberland, Randy Knapick, and Steve Schibuola summarized the breakout sessions that they facilitated, providing details about what was discussed in each session.

Next Steps & Conclusion

Corey Pitts concluded the meeting by explaining the next steps in the process, including upcoming County capital budget adoption in May 2022, in-person and virtual outreach events in May and June 2022, completion of the 35% preliminary engineering milestone at the end of 2022, public and stakeholder involvement following 35% design, and plans for the next CAC meeting in the fall of 2022.

As a follow-up to the presentation portion of the meeting, Corey opened the floor for questions and group discussion:

Q #1:

Based on observed traffic patterns and ridership levels on each bus, it seems that the most important section is the northern end, going down to Shady Grove Road. That seems to be where ridership is the highest. We hope you can complete that section first.

R #1:

The Central portion is planned to move forward first, which is the section from Germantown to a point just slightly south of Shady Grove. This phase will connect to the Montgomery College-Rockville campus, since we did see substantial ridership demand to that location. We feel this is a good start to the project. Then, the other two phases can be completed afterwards.

Discussion:

Participant responded by explaining that going to Montgomery College-Rockville is acceptable, since there are probably many students who go to Montgomery College and some of them likely do not have cars. That would make sense. South of Rockville Metro Station however, based on my observations, is that there is very little ridership on Route 101 at that point. Once you go south from that point, traffic gets worse and worse. There is more traffic southbound all day, trying to reach the Beltway. Another question I have is about deadheading buses, or buses going in the opposite direction of the envisioned peak, are going to stop at every traffic light. Which buses get priority? Buses going northbound during the AM rush hour, or buses going southbound during the AM rush hour?

MCDOT provided explanation that the computer operating the traffic signal can be programmed to benefit certain directions via the signal priority. Where buses are in their own lanes, it will be free from congestion. These details will be determined during final design, in terms of prioritization at each intersection. The state will have an interest in this as well. There will be more to come during final design.

Participant then asked if BRT buses are going to run at three-minute intervals, one bus won't be able to pass another bus, which will cause bunching. Will this be a problem?

MCDOT explains that this should not be the case. For the FLASH on Route 29, MCDOT has been managing headways and monitoring them to maintain the levels we want. This same type of management would occur on MD 355 BRT, to maintain appropriate intervals. BRT buses passing one another should not be necessary since each bus will be serving the same stops and there will be no need to pass slower buses.