Meeting Notes

Project name:	Great Seneca Transit Network - Design Process
Date:	Wednesday, March 15, 2023
Location:	ZOOM Virtual Meeting
Subject:	Great Seneca Transit Network Virtual Public Meeting

PROJECT TEAM

MCDOT
- Deanna Archey: Acting Chief of Planning & Implementation
- Joana Conklin: Manager of Transit Development, Advancement & Innovation
- Will Kenlaw: Manager of Marketing, Advertising, and Customer Relations
- Wayne Miller: Passenger Facility Manager

VHB
- Daniel Lovas
- Gabe Kleinfeld
- Drew Morrison
- Darrell Smith

RK&K
- Michael Geffel

PRR
- Marshall Bell
- Tammy Leigh DeMent
- Traceé Strum-Gilliam
- Lauren Whalley-Hill

There were 57 public attendees, the full list is included at the end of these meeting notes.

WELCOME

Tammy Leigh DeMent with PRR reviewed the meeting agenda, noting there would be time throughout the presentation for questions and comments. Deanna Archey with MCDOT greeted attendees and provided project background.

BACKGROUND & PURPOSE

Drew Morrison with VHB explained that the process leading up to Ride On ext*R*a services dates to the establishment of the Great Seneca Science Corridor (GSSC) Master Plan in 2010, which established the Life Sciences Center and set the vision for the project area to become a premier location for advanced technology companies, particularly in the biotech space, as well as a mixed-use hub. It was determined a planned bus rapid transit network is needed to support the larger Life Sciences Center vision.

In 2021, the Montgomery County Planning Department launched the Minor Master Plan amendment to the GSSC Master Plan. Research from this amendment found that while there's been tremendous progress at creating a Life Sciences hub in the area, some of the large projects envisioned in the master plan lacked funding to be built, and the full mixed-use vision for the GSSC has not yet been fully realized. Establishing and reaching that vision depends upon a key element of the master plan, which requires a transportation-mode shift away from automobiles before additional new development will be approved.

The Montgomery County Planning Department began to look at how they could enhance the transit options in the area despite the lack of funding. This included review of the Corridor Forward Plan, which was a holistic look at the different types of transit improvements that could be made along the I-270 corridor to improve mobility. This plan defined the need for a dedicated bus network, with major Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) corridors and corridor connectors in the GSSC project area, which would help create not only a vibrant Life Sciences hub, but also connect people to educational and job opportunities within the sector.

Three fundamental principles undergird the vision and planning of short-term transit investment to support the GSSC Master Plan:
- **Unleashing Economic Growth:** GSSC is a key piece of the County's biotech and life sciences economy. Post-pandemic, we know that biotech is going to be a central piece of the county's economic future
- **Essential Workers & Essential Work:** Healthcare, vaccine research, and education activities are happening all around the GSSC hub. Plans need to ensure people can access the opportunities that are in the county.
- **Neighborhood Connectivity:** Plans need to address the need for direct bus transit for residents and workers to get to their destination. Key activity and development centers include:
  o RIO Center
  o Crown Farm
  o JHU
  o Adventist Shady Grove Medical Center
  o Universities at Shady Grove
  o Traville Village
  o Shady Grove Road corridor

Ride On ext*R*a is one of the short-term investments that will support the GSSC Master Plan. Ride On ext*R*a is a Montgomery County-branded bus service with fewer stops and increased transit improvements for more efficient and reliable travel. The first route, 101, expands service on MD 355 (between Bethesda Medical Center and Lake Forest Transit Center). All buses will have free Wi-Fi access and phone charging, as well as real-time display screens and extra padding on seats, providing a higher quality of service to commuters.

SERVICE PLAN AND IMPROVEMENTS

Daniel Lovas with VHB shared about GSSC Ride On ext*R*a Phase 1, which will include two routes between Shady Grove Metro and Traville Transit Center/USG that will operate with a standard 7-days a week, 14-hour service.

Pink Route: links the Shady Grove corridor with Life Sciences Center via Medical Center Drive, with stops at:
- Shady Grove Metro
- Shady Grove Road at Choke Cherry Road
- Shady Grove Road at Corporate Boulevard
- Research Boulevard at Omega Drive
- Medical Center Drive-JHU
- Medical Center Drive at Medical Center Way

Buses on the Pink Route will run every 10 minutes during weekday peak hours, every 15 minutes during weekday off-peak hours, and every 30 minutes during weekend service hours.

Lime Route: uses Route I-370 to provide an express route to RIO, Crown Farm and the heat of the Life Science Center, with stops at:
- Shady Grove and Crabbs Branch Way
- Fields Road at Ellington Boulevard
- Decoverly Drive at Crown Park Avenue
- Decoverly Drive at Diamondback Drive
- Broschart Road-JHU
- Broschart Road at Medical Center Way.

Buses on the Lime Route will run every 15 minutes during weekday peak hours, every 15 minutes during weekday off-peak hours, and every 30 minutes during weekend service hours.

All Ride On ext*R*a bus shelters will be equipped with shade roofs with built-in lighting, a real-time information display case to support trip planning and provide service updates in real-time, a bench, and a trash can.

Other transit improvements will also be made to support both routes, including:

- Transit signal priority (Pink Route only): traffic signal control to give priority to buses, allowing them more green signal time to get the bus through intersections, helping to provide high-efficiency, high-frequency service while preventing additional congestion.
- Dedicated bus lanes connecting RIO/Crown Farm to Medical Center Drive (both Lime and Pink routes): proposed repurposing curbside mixed-travel and/or parking lanes in certain areas to provide shared accommodation for bus and bicycle activity. Street parking in certain areas along the route will be maintained (including RIO and Crown Farm). Traffic will have access to dedicated lanes to make right turns.
  o Dedicated lanes will be painted red, and include markings to designate use by buses and bicycles

MCDOT conducted a traffic analysis to assess the impact of dedicated lanes. When comparing existing and future (with dedicated bus-bike lanes) traffic capabilities along the routes, the analysis indicated that critical intersections will continue to operate at very similar levels of service, with an overall acceptable level of service in all areas per Montgomery County guidelines.

PROJECT BENEFITS

Daniel then explained the benefits for the GSSC and surrounding communities the Ride On ext*R*a routes will support:
- **Economic Growth**: Great Seneca is at the heart of the County's biotech and life sciences economy, and these routes will help advance the development and growth opportunities in those sectors.
- **Transit Improvements:** These routes will significantly expand the scope of the improvements proposed in the GSSC Master Plan, and enhance the quality of transit, helping attract more riders and improve the experience for existing riders.
- **Connectivity and Collaboration:** The connections the routes will make include important higher education and medical facilities including (JHU, Adventist Shady Grove Medical and USG), connecting workers, employers, and students
- **Sustainability:** Ride On ExtRa will help shift trips away from cars and allow further development with less traffic, helping the County advance ambitious climate goals.

The Ride On ext*R*a project was always envisioned to help the Great Seneca area shift from an auto centric focus, with the opportunity to implement high-volume ridership. The service has the opportunity to implement

high-volume ridership overtime, with the potential to reach as many as 4,000-5,000 riders in Phase 1, maturing over time. As the long-term Ride On ext*R*a network is realized, the system has the potential to help the County meet the full range of GSSC Master Plan targets that are tied to the shift of reducing single-use occupancy vehicles and reducing emissions.

Gabe Kleinfeld with VHB then shared the metrics of travel time savings that will benefit riders, comparing bus travel times between the existing local service and the Ride On ext*R*a service along three routes:
- RIO to Traville Transit Center
    - Existing local service: 53 minutes
    - Ride On ext*R*a service: 10 minutes
- Shady Grove Metro to Adventist Medical Center
    - Existing local service: 43 minutes
    - Ride On ext*R*a service: 21 minutes
- Shady Grove Metro to Traville Transit Center
    - Existing local service: 25 minutes
    - Ride On ext*R*a service: 18 minutes

Gabe noted that there as there is currently no direct service between these stops, Ride On ext*R*a direct routes will lead to significant travel time reduction and improved service.

Ride On ext*R*a will also improve transit access to all areas that are currently within a 60-minute travel time frame, including areas in Germantown, Damascus and Poolesville, with expanded service to equity emphasis areas of persistent poverty (defined by MWCOG as an area identified by the U.S. census as having of significant poverty over the past 30 years). Populations within these communities are often transit-dependent, and Ride On ext*R*a will be providing more options for efficient transit.

Ride On ext*R*a will be a Zero Emissions Bus Fleet, playing a significant role in the county's sustainability goals and the creation of infrastructure to support them. MCDOT will advance battery electric technology on the Great Seneca Ride On ext*R*a as soon as possible after the June 2024 service launch, including selecting a location for charging equipment that will allow the buses to charge *en route* using a pantograph-type charger.

TIMELINE

Deanna Archey with MCDOT shared information on the project timeline, starting with the visionary plan for the entire Great Seneca network of services to be implemented over the next several years. In 2022, the planning and preliminary engineering phase of the project by evaluating the station and bus shelter locations, as well as identifying the dedicated bus lanes and traffic signal priority points. The project has now transitioned into its final engineering design phase, beginning construction in summer of 2023, with service launching summer of 2024.

Deanna encouraged the public to ask questions and offer feedback throughout this process and provided contact information and online resources for project updates.

Q&A

1. **How many riders are currently using the Ride On ext*R*a 101 on Route 355?**
   Route 101 is averaging close to about 700 riders on average daily.

2. **Is the Great Seneca Transit Network eventually planned to be extended to NIST and Lake Forest?**
   While Phase 1 does not include this network, there is long-term fuller network that was part of the Great Seneca Transit Vision plan that could potentially connect these locations. MCDOT is also currently working on the Ride On Reimagined project, which is evaluating the entire network. The

website for this project will include information about proposed improvements to other routes and areas.

3. **How will the initiation of these Ride On ext*R*a routes impact service on Ride On route 43?**
As the proposed routes on the Ride On ext*R*a service are in addition to, not replacing, existing routes, there should be little to no impact on current service.

4. **The Fallsgrove Village Center is the largest retail node on Shady Grove Road. Was consideration given to a Pink Line stop there?**
While Phase 1 of the service is focused on efficient connections between Shady Grove Metro and the Life Sciences Center, a Cobalt line has been proposed for a future phase that would connect with the Fallsgrove area.

5. **Is there existing traffic on the roads through Crown and Decoverly to the point that warrants taking a lane for buses?**
The impetus of designating bus and bike lanes is to both accommodate and visibly promote the presence of Ride On ext*R*a service and demonstrate Montgomery County's dedication to providing a robust, high-quality transit network, attracting new riders. Current traffic volume levels are accommodating to the conversion of dedicated bus lanes, and the intent is to preserve that kind of accommodation in the future even as additional development takes place.

6. **Since Metrorail serves riders south of Gaithersburg, how do you envision customers from the "upcounty" being able to take advantage of the new Ride On ext*R*a system? MARC runs only seven trains per day.**
While Phase 1 focuses on connecting Shady Grove and the Life Sciences Center, the larger vision and long-term planning does include service to improve connectivity for residents in northern parts of Montgomery County. MCDOT is also currently working on the Ride On Reimagined project, which is evaluating the entire network. The website for this project will include information about proposed improvements to other routes and areas.

7. **When will a majority of Ride On route have electric buses?**
Montgomery County's Climate Action Plan prohibits the purchase of any more diesel buses. Buses typically have a lifespan of 12-15 years and will be replaced by electric buses when necessary. The county is also considering hydrogen fuel cell buses in addition to electric. It is the county's goal to have a zero emissions fleet by 2030-2035.

8. **Do you envision anymore bus service between USG and Rockville than now exists?**
In addition to the Cobalt route that is proposed for a later phase, there is also planning for a route on Darnestown Road that provides connection between Rockville and Shady Grove.

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