



Baltimore Transit Equity Coalition Sunday Briefing Series #1

Comments on Edmondson Village Task Force Presentation of MTA and TREND Chicago 9/20/2023

BRT is to expense as LRT is to Investment

Introduction

Edmondson Village area members of the **Baltimore Transit Equity Coalition** (BTEC) joined the meeting on Wednesday, 9/20/2023 of the Edmondson Village Task Force (EVTF). We have met in past EVTF meetings with Council Member Burnett and staff.

We remain very interested in the presentations of Liz Gordon, Planning Director of the Maryland Transit Administration (MTA) and Allison Scott, MTA Red Line Project Director.

**(Meeting recording: Red Line Project presentation: 4: 35
- 19: 42 / Red Line Q&A: 20:05 / Passcode: V=7G.1pD**

https://us06web.zoom.us/rec/share/AQ61DBHMX0kEn6ndopg_B1QdGklVSalmLM63P_kJzu3QujHCXvH0Bzmnxve3OrN.tyUJjc1C7YT0VsZK

Due to the methods the Maryland Department of Transportation (MDOT) and MTA are using to manage the Governor's pledge to complete the Red Line light rail transit (LRT) project, we must also share our perspectives on the MTA practices, comments, and projections.

TREND Chicago representative Emma Roberts Gonzalez gave a very engaging discussion of the plans and efforts made by TREND to strengthen its ties to the Edmondson Village community. BTEC has met with Lyneir Richardson and local TREND representative, Garrick Hines, to brief them on the synergy of economic development and LRT. Based in Chicago, the home of the Chicago Metropolitan Transportation Authority (CMTA), **TREND** is already fully aware of the need to conduct economic development and transit planning as a duo "not to be torn asunder."

From BTEC's perspective, the MTA presentation was troubling.

The following observations and perspectives are among BTEC's alerts to the Edmondson Village communities, leaders, partners, and associates, that we challenge MTA to clarify and improve their messaging, language, conflicting information, community engagement strategies, and purpose as to modal choice. We urge Council Member Burnett, staff, and all stakeholders to join us in demanding ethical practices and transparency from MTA.

Will the Red Line LRT project become a bus rapid transit (BRT) project although it was fully funded and approved as a light rail transit project?

Observations, Comments, Alerts

1. What is the goal? What are the problems we are trying to solve?

“What are the problems we are trying to solve?” must always be the first question in any project’s execution.

What parameters of the features of BRT and LRT must be compared to determine the mode that will be recommended to the Governor as the best choice? What benefits will each mode bring to Baltimore over the foreseeable future as measured in decades? How will the Baltimore region solve the challenge of improved transit equity coupled with economically transformative transit-oriented development (TOD)?

2. The MTA presentation did not emphasize the fact that system reliability is a key parameter on which there is no competition between BRT and LRT. After actual access to transit, reliability is the single most important feature of a transit system to transit riders. MTA was not candid about its own on-time-performance (OTP). It is dismally languishing in the [60 percentiles](#)¹. We challenge MTA to be transparent on this matter and to explain why it

¹ Maryland Transit Administration; *MDOT MTA Performance Improvement*; <https://www.mta.maryland.gov/performance-improvement>; On time performance for bus routes at 68.6%

changed the definition of OTP to [two-minutes early and seven-minutes late](#)².

LRT's reliability is a product of its fixed guideway construction with little or no competition with local street traffic.

The widely disparaged Baltimore Link bus system has convinced thousands of transit riders that a new bus system cannot be called "progress," even if it is called BRT.

3. At EVTF, MTA presented no assessment of its Open House program. BTEC found the following matters of great concern:

a. Scheduling: Four of the five Open House programs were convened at 3pm or 4pm during the regular 9 to 5 workday. The first Open House, at St. Bernadine's on Edmondson Avenue, was scheduled from 4 to 6pm. Such scheduling guaranteed that transit-reliant riders and most of the workforce interested in the fate of the Red Line LRT could not attend.

MTA, with its experience over the years, has been aware that scheduling can determine the nature of the public participation at the Open Houses. The 10am Saturday Open House on Eastern Avenue could only be reached from the Edmondson Village community by car or by unreliable weekend-scheduled buses. Attendance, nevertheless, was meager.

² Baltimore Fishbowl; "One Year Later, BaltimoreLink Bus system falls short of expectations"; <https://baltimorefishbowl.com/stories/one-year-later-baltimorelink-bus-system-falls-short-of-expectations/>

The coming round of four Open Houses beginning November 2nd, will schedule weekday events at 6:00pm. MTA has heard the criticism of the original scheduling. Why didn't MTA schedule the first round at 6:00pm? Perhaps, the change means MTA is sensitive to community criticism. We are hopeful.

b. Layout and format: MTA information boards, with charts, photographs, and transit narrative circled the Open House venues. MTA staff and contractors waited at the boards for community attendees to ask questions or register their comments on the Red Line LRT project. The format did not permit all other attendees to hear the questions asked or the answers given.

The author shared a table with two community attendees. They repeated blatantly incorrect information about the Red Line LRT's threat to destroy their homes and properties, and that some of which would be appropriated by eminent domain. At the table was an MTA contractor who made no effort to debunk the myth of a rapacious, destructive Red Line LRT, the bane of home and property owners along the corridor. Rather than debunking the myth, the MTA contractor allowed the destructive myth about the Red Line LRT to persist.

I intervened and corrected the misinformation. No other attendees could hear my correction: The Red Line LRT will do no more damage to homes and properties along the corridor than street cars did over fifty years ago. Like the street cars, the Red Line LRT travels in the

Edmondson Avenue median. [MTA's online FAQ](#)³ **does not include this concern and does not answer that question.**

BTEC recommends that MTA conduct forums or assemblies at the next round of Open Houses or provide information video screens in order that all attendees will have the same information, including attendee questions and MTA answers.

c. Upfront cost of modal vehicles: At the second Open House, at the War Memorial, an MTA contractor told a BTEC leader that BRT will permit easier funding citing the upfront costs of BRT vehicles compared to LRT vehicles.

BRT vehicles cost from [\\$370,000-\\$1.6 million](#)⁴ while LRT vehicles cost about [\\$2.4 million](#)⁵. The MTA contractor did not mention that the durability of BRT vehicles is about [10 years](#)⁶, while LRT vehicles endure about [30 years](#), the durability of three to four BRT vehicles.

There is no significant BRT longitudinal advantage in the cost of vehicles given their short-term durability when compared to LRT vehicles. [A 3 car LRT train has a seated capacity of 270 passengers, while a BRT vehicle can only](#)

³ U.S. Department of Transportation Federal Transit Administration; *Bus Rapid Transit Elements Performance Benefits*; <https://www.transit.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/BRTBrochure.pdf>

⁴ U.S. Department of Transportation Federal Transit Administration; *Bus Rapid Transit Elements Performance Benefits*; <https://www.transit.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/BRTBrochure.pdf>

⁵ Colorado Department of Transportation; "Overview of Transit Vehicles"; https://www.codot.gov/programs/innovativemobility/assets/commuterchoices/documents/trandir_transit.pdf

⁶ Federal Transit Administration; "Default Useful Benchmark Cheat Sheet"; <https://www.transit.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/docs/FTA%20TAM%20ULB%20Cheat%20Sheet%202016-10-26.pdf>

[transport 40-60 passengers](#)⁷. When reduction in automobile use is compared, LRT is the better mode for the fight against vehicular pollution and climate change.

d. BRT features MTA did not share: BRT requires more operational personnel, a driver for each bus, while for LRT [one conductor guides two, three, up to four vehicles](#)⁸ depending on the vehicular design and the length of the station platform. [Neither do BRT longitudinal costs for maintenance, repair and spare parts confer a cost advantage of BRT over LRT](#)⁹. LRT also attracts transit-oriented development along its corridor, while BRT does not.

The MTA contractor's comments on costs are not only "putting the thumb on the scales" to favor BRT, but MTA has not conducted a rigorous cost engineering process in collaboration with US DOT Federal Transit Administration (FTA). Without such cost engineering, there is no rule of thumb for the cost of transit systems. The MTA contractor was exhibiting a common bias in favor of BRT although a well-executed cost study would avoid MTA's modal bias. When will MTA conduct the cost study? The contractor's remarks were premature.

BTEC recommends that MTA practice objective rather than subjective cost information sharing in all its public

⁷ WSP; *Bus Automation White Paper*;

<https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.wsp.com/-/media/insights/us/bus-automation-whitepaper/bus-automation-whitepaper-wsp-2023.pdf&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1697648446897551&usg=AOvVaw2QOKM-g0fNGmlhpMWymGE> ; pg. 15

⁸American Public Transportation Association Transportation Research Board; *This is Light Rail*; https://nacto.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/2-12_TRB-This-is-Light-Rail-Transit_2000.pdf ; pg. 14

⁹ "Light Rail Now! Mythbusters Weblog";

[https://www.lightrailnow.org/myths/m_mythlog001.htm#:~:text=Light%20rail%20transit%20\(LRT\)%20rail cars,range%20of%2030-40%20years.](https://www.lightrailnow.org/myths/m_mythlog001.htm#:~:text=Light%20rail%20transit%20(LRT)%20rail cars,range%20of%2030-40%20years.)

outreach and engagement including the next round of Open Houses.

e. Development along the Red Line LRT corridor: One of the most frequently asked questions is that of development along the corridor. One of the MTA information boards featured a depiction of recent development along the Red Line LRT corridor in Brewers Hill and Greektown.

In the Edmondson Village Task Force presentation, the MTA Red Line Project Director said that development on the corridor in East Baltimore was “in conflict with the alignment” (Meeting recording at 12:18). The presenter did not state clearly that the “conflict” did not constitute a barrier or preclude the completion of the Red Line LRT project.

MTA did not alert the EVTF audience or those visiting the other Open Houses that the development does not constitute a physical barrier to the construction and operation of the Red Line LRT. However, without such an advisory, MTA permits Open House attendees to believe that development in East Baltimore precludes the completion of the Red Line LRT project.

Such incomplete information is the same tactic used when MTA staff do not correct the myth that the Red Line will destroy homes and properties and will require the use of eminent domain.

BTEC was assured in conference with MTA officials that development near the Red Line right of way (ROW) may require “tweaking” the alignment, if necessary, but that

there are no physical barriers to the resumption and completion of the Red Line LRT project.

BTEC recommends that MTA halt in its tilt toward BRT when Baltimore's future should be based on independently verifiable data instead of knowingly careless insinuations made available to community members who are not transit project experts.

f. Whose opinions will determine MTA's modal choice recommendation? The MTA presenters noted that they reached about an unimpressive 450 responders in their summer "pop ups" and Open Houses (14:58 of meeting recording). BTEC Nation members and community attendees did not report an estimated total of 450 participants among the non-MTA staff at the Open Houses. At several Open Houses, MTA staff and contractors outnumbered community attendees. For the record, we challenge MTA to share their Open House attendance documentation and key takeaways from community engagement and surveys.

Since the June 2017 launch of the Baltimore Link, the dysfunctional consolation prize thrown to Baltimore following the cancellation of the approved Red Line LRT, thousands of transit riders have roundly disparaged the Baltimore Link, particularly its core bus service with its [83% Black ridership](#) ¹⁰

The first of two rallies at the War Memorial following the launch of the Baltimore Link attracted [200-300 enraged](#)

¹⁰ Maryland Transit Administration; *Title VI Implementation Program 2020-2023*; pg. 104
https://s3.amazonaws.com/mta-website-staging/mta-website-staging/files/Title%20VI/MTA_TitleVIProgram_2020-2023_05.15.2020.pdf

[transit riders](#) ¹¹. Local mainstream media characterized the event as a “near-riot.”

Will the opinions of the War Memorial rally attendees’ matter to MTA in the modal choice recommendation to the Governor?

Will seven years of dismal transit experiences reported by thousands of Baltimoreans to MTA, transit advocacy organizations like BTEC, institutions, employers, public schools, personal services enterprises, health care providers awaiting late clients, and others be ignored?

BTEC insists that the universe of opinions to be analyzed in shaping MTA’s modal choice recommendation must be much greater than the attendees at MTA “pop-ups” and Open Houses in the Summer to Winter 2023-time frame.

BTEC challenges MTA to reveal to the general public the data and universe of opinions on which it will base its recommendation to the Governor before the recommendation is submitted permitting a comment period for stakeholders. BTEC notes that transit riders’ opinions have had little impact on MTA’s public transit investment and operational practices over the eight years of the Hogan administration.

Instead, we would dare assert that anyone using the Baltimore Link bus system two times or more per week will never insist that we don’t need greatly improved and reliable public transportation like that offered by a modern Red Line LRT fixed guideway rail.

¹¹ The Baltimore Sun; “What has MTA Wrought?”; <https://www.baltimoresun.com/opinion/editorial/bs-ed-0628-baltimorelink-20170627-story.html>

These riders were not present at the MTA Open Houses. The Open Houses are the venues that attract higher income attendees, home, or property owners, and those concerned about the impact of Red Line construction on their commercial establishments. [MTA's own data](#)¹² can reveal the income strata of Baltimore Link passengers from the core bus service to the MARC commuter rail service.

A purposefully narrow universe of opinions will do a disservice to Baltimore's future.

Conclusion

The **Baltimore Transit Equity Coalition** (BTEC) has advised Governor Moore to pursue immediately a re-evaluation of the approved Red Line light rail project Final Environmental Impact Study (FEIS). Our meetings with the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) have engendered a number of concerns about MTA's practices and policies used to formulate its recommendation to Governor Moore regarding the best mode, Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) or Light Rail Transit (LRT). BTEC aims to be particularly vigilant on the process leading to the modal choice recommendation. The choice will determine whether Baltimore will languish economically adrift hobbled by a largely dysfunctional, unreliable bus-dominant transit system or make the bold, but wisest

¹² Maryland Transit Administration; *Title VI Implementation Program 2020-2023*; pg. 104
https://s3.amazonaws.com/mta-website-staging/mta-website-staging/files/Title%20VI/MTA_TitleVIProgram_2020-2023_05.15.2020.pdf

decision to complete the Red Line LRT project with investments at every level of government.

LRT has been found in many cities in the nation to be superior to other modes of public transportation including BRT in the delivery of equity, system reliability, and large-scale economic benefits as a system anchoring mode.

This Sunday Briefing is the first of a series by BTEC to frame the modal choice matter and recruit community members and regional leaders to take action now in demanding the completion of the approved Red Line LRT.

See BTEC website for action steps and more information: <https://moretransitequity.com/>

BRT is to expense as LRT is to investment.

Samuel Jordan - Baltimore Transit Equity Coalition

10/15/2023