

# Maryland communities have mixed reactions to Purple Line's progress

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SILVER SPRING, Md. - Lisa Goldberg, a Silver Spring resident, commutes to Rockville, Md., for work. Although she calls herself a “big advocate of public transportation,” she makes the 13-mile trip by car. Traveling by Metro would require a 50-minute journey on the Red Line or an hour-long bus trip with a transfer.

Goldberg hopes the [Purple Line](#), the light rail system proposed by the state of Maryland that would connect the spokes of the Red Line at Silver Spring and Bethesda, is the answer.



**An anti-purple line sign near the intersection of Wayne Ave. and Dale Dr. Some are concerned about the effects the station here would have on the neighborhood: Photo**

by Kristin McGrath

“If there were a rail option that was faster that I could rely on, I am sure I would take it because I really miss taking the Metro,” Goldberg said.

Meanwhile, Christine Arnold-Lourie, who has owned her home in Silver Spring for 30 years, dreads seeing her community altered by construction and train tracks.

“I’m not sure I’m going to stay,” she said. “To see my neighborhood torn up the way it’s going to be, it might be too heartbreaking.”

These are some of the disparate reactions to the Purple Line since Gov. Martin O'Malley endorsed a light rail line (over a previously proposed rapid bus system) to connect Prince Georges and Montgomery counties last August. While some look forward to cutting down on their commute, others do not want the trains in their backyards.

As the project goes through a lengthy funding approval process by the [Federal Transit Administration](#), the [Maryland Transit Administration](#) (the entity that would likely operate the Purple Line) has been meeting with individual communities to reveal the plans in greater detail—and gauge residents' reactions.

The proposed route, which would cost \$1.5 billion to complete, has plans for 21 stations. It would connect to existing transportation lines, including Metro stations New Carrollton on the Orange Line, College Park on the Green Line and Silver Spring and Bethesda on the Red Line. It would also connect to all three lines of the Maryland Area Rail Commuter (MARC) at Silver Spring, College Park and New Carrollton and to the Amtrak station at New Carrollton.

View [Purple line proposed route](#) on a larger map

According to the MTA's projections, the 16-mile route would eliminate 19,200 cars from the road daily, with estimates of 64,800 boardings per day, said Michael Madden, Chief of Project Development for the MTA. The greatest number of riders, he said, is expected between Silver Spring and Bethesda, and 43 percent of the total riders would also use Metro as part of their trip.

"In the future, this will give people much improved access to the Metro," said Madden at a recent community focus group in Takoma Park.

The frequency of the trains (about every six minutes during rush hour and every 10 minutes during off-peak times) and the operating hours would mirror those of the Metro trains, Madden said.

Although many are expected to use the Purple Line in conjunction with Metro, the light rail trains (which will be powered by overhead wires) and stations would not resemble the huge trains and massive underground tunnels with which Metro passengers are familiar.

The trains would be smaller and would hold approximately 240 passengers (seated and standing), compared with the six to eight-car Metro trains that hold up to 120 passengers per car. Out of the route's 16.3-mile length, 13.7 miles of track would be on the surface, going underground when the grading is too steep for them to remain on the surface.

"With light rail, you can walk across, you can bike across," said Madden. "They can be much closer to the community."

Along much of the proposed route, the tracks would be built off to the side of the roads. However, some parts of the route (such as the stretches along University Boulevard and Wayne Avenue), would be built in the median of existing roads, which would be widened to accommodate them. The trains would stop at traffic signals and obey the posted speed limits for the streets along which they travel.

The stops would also look different from the mammoth subterranean Metro stations. All would be above ground in the center of the road with platforms 12 to 14 inches off the ground, said Joseph Romanowski, a transit engineer for consulting firm RK&K.

“Think an upscale bus-stop,” Romanowski said.

### **Takoma Park citizens prepared to get on board**

For those who live near the proposed route, building the Purple Line would entail some growing pains. At a community focus group in Takoma Park, Madden and Romanowski said no homes or businesses along the route would be



**Pedestrians cross New Hampshire Ave. at University Blvd. One of the proposed stops on the Purple line, the busy intersection sees 90,000 cars per day:** Photo by Kristin McGrathdisplaced. However, University Boulevard would have to be widened for the trains' new median.

The Purple Line would also intersect with another transportation project already in the works—the [Takoma/Langley Transit Center](#) at University Boulevard and New Hampshire Avenue, which will serve as a hub (with a shelter and waiting areas) for bus passengers to transfer between the many routes that converge there. The area sees thousands of commuters per day, and 90,000 cars pass through the intersection, said Erwin Mack, Executive Director of the Takoma/Langley Crossroads shopping area.

Without proper pedestrian safety precautions, such as carefully timed crossing signals, the Purple Line would add to the chaos of buses, commuters, cars and customers visiting the shopping area.

“We are concerned about educating people to watch out for their own safety,” Mack said. “Pedestrians are very careless, and we’ve had far too many fatalities and serious injuries.”

Despite the complications and safety concerns, those at the meeting in Takoma Park expressed enthusiasm for the Purple Line, including Mack, who has lived in the area since 1977. Mack said he is “looking forward to having it finished” but confesses he’ll “probably need a walker by the time it’s done.”

Gentrification of the area is a concern for some, but is not likely to occur, Mack said.

“Wherever there’s developments such as this and you have transit centers, developers want to come in and be part of it,” said Mack. “We’re not trying to get rid of low-rent housing for the people who are here. Those are our customers. Why would we want to lose them?”

### **Not so fast, say some Silver Spring residents**

For some Silver Spring residents, however, gentrification is just one of many concerns.

Much of the controversy centers on the proposed station at Wayne Avenue and Dale Drive. Citizens’ trust was compromised when the MTA included the station in its plans, despite the local planning board’s rejection of the proposed location, according to Chris Richardson, chair of the Park Hills Civic Association Purple Line Task Force.

“My concern is that the trust and credibility is undermined when a decision made at the local level is overridden by the state,” Richardson said at the meeting.

“In terms of the world ‘overridden,’” Madden responded, “that is untrue.”

Madden said the station is under study, and no final decision has been made. It was included in the MTA’s proposal so it could be part of the environmental impact report. Wayne Avenue would also be widened so if the decision is made at a local level to include a station there, it can be built at any time, Madden said.

Without a station at Wayne and Dale, Madden said, there would be a mile between the Manchester Road and Silver Spring Library stations. Residents living in the gap would have tracks going through their neighborhood but no station within reasonable walking distance.

“If you have a station there, you’re serving the community much better,” Madden said.

Some citizens say the convenience is not worth it. Children crossing multiple lanes of traffic plus the tracks to get to Sligo Creek Elementary School create safety concerns. The proposed Green Trail along Wayne Avenue, which was originally supposed to have separate lanes for bikes and pedestrians, has been reduced to a single lane — a situation Richardson calls “a recipe for disaster,” given the steep grade. And drivers trying to avoid sharing the road with the light rail trains would result in “a lot of cut-through traffic” on neighborhood streets, he said.

Yet the biggest concern for some who have lived in the area for decades is defending its character from commercial development around the station.

“It seems pretty clear to us having a station at Dale means the single-family character of the neighborhood is vulnerable to higher density around the station,” said Richardson.

This scenario, Madden said, is not likely, as the area is zoned residential.

“The only way development is going to happen is if someone comes in and buys up single-family homes,” he said.

Arnold-Lourie, however, said there “isn’t any question it will change the neighborhood.” The community is well served by buses, she said, so there is no need for a light rail system. The noise of the trains and the clutter of the overhead wires, she worries, would make homes less desirable and squeeze out those who now enjoy a unique community.

“I don’t know any other middle-class neighborhood in the area that’s as ethnically and religiously mixed as this neighborhood is,” she said. “We also have amenities. We have Sligo Creek Park right down the street. You can walk to downtown Silver Spring. The only other place that has those kinds of amenities is Chevy Chase, where the houses cost four times as much. This is the only place in the county where middle-class people get this.”

Arnold-Lourie also worries trains running every six minutes during rush hour on the surface would “tie traffic up in Silver Spring in appalling ways.”

“I think there are people who want the Purple Line so badly that they are just hoping and believing that they are going to get the Purple Line they want,” she said.

Whether the Purple Line fulfills commuters’ dreams or residents’ worst nightmares will not be determined for years. The MTA is meeting with representatives from the Federal Transit Administration to determine if the Purple Line qualified for funding through the [New Starts](#) program, which provides funding for new transit projects. Construction will begin in 2013 at the earliest.

“I could see myself not riding it out of spite,” said Richardson. “But, in 2030, if traffic is as bad as they say it’s going to be, I might find myself taking it to College Park or Bethesda.”