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Residents split on Purple Line tunnel

Proponents say MTA report light on negatives, opponents say gap between stations would not serve local riders

by Jason Tomassini | Staff Writer

This story was corrected on June 15, 2009.

Residents who live near the site of a proposed Purple Line tunnel that would run beneath Wayne Avenue in Silver Spring were divided last week in a heated meeting with the Maryland Transit Administration, which is calling for a surface route along Wayne.

Proponents of the tunnel said the MTA's recently released 15-page report was light on details regarding the negative impacts of the surface option. Backers of a surface route defended the MTA report, noting that the tunnel would not serve the immediate community because of a 1.5-mile gap between stations in Silver Spring.

The MTA and Gov. Martin O'Malley (D) are considering three options of either light-rail transit or bus rapid transit for a 16-mile mass transit route that would connect downtown Bethesda to New Carrollton via Silver Spring.

But at the May 20 meeting at Oak View Elementary School in Silver Spring the focus was on two options: a medium-investment light-rail line that would run aboveground along Wayne and a high-investment light-rail route that would tunnel from the Silver Spring Transit Center at Wayne and Colesville Road through downtown Silver Spring to Mansfield Road.

Medium-investment light-rail has been endorsed by County Executive Isiah Leggett (D), the Montgomery County Council and the county Planning Board.

The surface route calls for a station at the planned site of a proposed Silver Spring Library at Wayne and Fenton Street and a second in downtown Silver Spring, said Michael Madden, the Purple Line project manager. The tunnel option would displace three houses on Wayne and restrict access to three or four others, Madden said.

With a tunnel, it would take 5.4 minutes to get through Silver Spring as opposed to 9 minutes for the surface option. But with the tunnel only bringing stations at the transit center and Manchester Place, the short travel time only benefits those traveling through Silver Spring, not residents along Wayne, said Jonathan Elkind, a Silver Spring resident and chairman of the Silver Spring Advocates, a pro-Purple Line group.

For the Silver Spring portion of the Purple Line, the medium-investment option would cost \$179 million and the tunnel option would cost \$352 million, according to the study.

The main advantage of the tunnel option is it would take the Purple Line transit cars off of already-congested Wayne, proponents said. Under the medium-investment option, the Purple Line would not have dedicated lanes. Left-turn lanes would be added to Wayne to accommodate the light rail.

But Silver Spring resident Adam Daniel said adding a train to Wayne would not make things much worse than they are now.

"Wayne is a street with noisy buses on it," said Daniel, who lives near the Wayne and Dale Drive intersection. "If anything, I would expect it to be a quieter street than it will be decades down the road if there is no mass transit."

The community met with MTA engineers five times to discuss the neighborhood impacts of the Purple Line, said Chris Richardson of the Park Hills Civic Association. For instance, under the surface route option, residents along Wayne would lose property due to the widening of the street to make way for new left-turn lanes.

But the impacts were not detailed in the draft environmental impact statement released by the Maryland Transit Administration last year or the tunnel study released this month, Richardson said.

"That would leave me to believe the decision to do a surface route on Wayne was already made," Richardson said.

Mark Gabriele, president of the Seven Oaks and Evanswood Civic Association, echoed those sentiments in a heated exchange with Madden.

"You go into great detail for the disadvantages of the tunnel, but no details about surface disadvantages," Gabriele said.

"The study was to analyze a tunnel, not the surface," Madden responded.

"I'm angry, policymakers are supposed to rely on civil servants for advice," Gabriele shot back.

"What about the people in the seven houses?" Madden responded, referring to the displaced or affected homes under the tunnel option. "Are they part of the community?"

Madden said a finalized version of the tunnel analysis will be completed in next couple of weeks and will include a more detailed study of the surface route option. Madden said he does not expect the County Council to take any official vote on the tunnel and the final decision will be made by O'Malley sometime in June.