

Not building Red Line would continue sad status quo

Michael Dresser | Getting There

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In the protracted debate over whether and how to build the transit project known as the Red Line, one compelling issue has been all but lost: the miserable status quo.

For decades, the main transportation corridor through West Baltimore has been six-lane U.S. 40, known for much of its length as Edmondson Avenue.

Each weekday morning, hordes of commuters from Catonsville, Ellicott City and other places to the west invade West Baltimore on their way downtown. Each weekday evening, they alternately race and crawl through the same neighborhoods, leaving nothing behind but their exhaust fumes. People crossing the avenue on foot put their lives on the line.

Over the past few weeks, I've altered my commuting route a few times to join the rush-hour herds. What I've observed makes me wonder why the residents of these neighborhoods didn't rise up long ago to demand change.

U.S. 40 in West Baltimore is the epitome of urban blight. It divides neighborhoods and creates nightmares for pedestrians. It's an ugly scar across the face of the city.

One of the alternatives in the current study of the Red Line - the proposed east-west transit line from Woodlawn to Bayview - is called "no build." It means just what the name implies.

For some reason, "no build" has a vocal group of supporters in West Baltimore. These folks are so worried about the prospect of a surface transit line on Edmondson Avenue that they flat-out oppose construction of the Red Line.

These sentiments were on display last month during a hearing at Edmondson High School where many residents - some operating on fears grounded on disinformation - testified that they would prefer "no build" to the leading light rail alternative.

It's understandable that folks reflexively prefer the devil they know to one they don't. But Red Line opponents need to take a long hard look at that familiar demon called U.S. 40. If the no-build option were to prevail because the community can't agree on a Red Line plan, the area probably will get worse each year as more cars flood the transit-deprived corridor. (The same applies on the east side.)

Much of the opposition to the Red Line in West Baltimore is based on a suspicion that whatever's being proposed by the powers that be is a sinister plot to benefit others at their expense. People with raw memories of losing homes to the infamous Highway to Nowhere - the aborted interstate just to the west of downtown - are being told the Red Line will claim 231 homes. The state's environmental plan makes clear that simply isn't so, but urban legends such as these are distorting the debate.

You can't blame people in West Baltimore for harboring distrust because they've been kicked around for decades by officials who put the interests of suburban drivers ahead of the needs of low-income, mostly African-American neighborhoods. The current configuration of Edmondson Avenue is a legacy of those days.

On its face, the idea of running a transit line on the surface of Edmondson does sound threatening. It's

not as if anyone would welcome a replay of the Howard Street light rail line into their communities. It would be madness to superimpose a line like that on the existing highway with all its current traffic.

But that's not what Mayor Sheila Dixon, herself a resident of the corridor, has in mind.

For one thing, the light rail of today bears little resemblance to the clunky system that opened here in the early 1990s. Modern systems such as the one in Portland, Ore., whoosh more than they clank.

Then there's the administration's vision of a new Edmondson Avenue. Dixon and her aides are talking about transforming the avenue from a commuter corridor to a neighborhood main street with lower speed limits and on-street parking - actually, something like what existed before the trolley lines were sacrificed on the altar of the internal combustion engine.

Throw in a heavy investment in streetscaping and community redevelopment and you have the possibility of progress in an area that has been stagnating for decades.

Let's do some environmental math. Yes, you do add what little sound a modern light rail system brings to the corridor. But here's what you subtract: the rumble of trucks, the roar of commuter traffic, the belching of fumes. Even with a surface route, the benefits would outweigh the costs.

If anyone has reason to be upset about the city's Red Line vision it's the people in the western suburbs who have been commuting into downtown Baltimore on U.S. 40. They're the ones who would be nudged to change their ways - either by stopping at a park-and-ride and taking the Red Line or by staying in their cars and taking the Beltway to Interstate 395.

The residents of the Red Line corridor have every right to demand answers from the Maryland Transit Administration and the city administration and to bargain for the best outcome. But to squander an opportunity to change that ugly, dangerous, neighborhood-killing status quo would be a tragic waste.

"No build" equals no hope.

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