A small group of determined activists organized into three citizen advocacy groups and stood up to the power of the General Assembly and Baltimore County's Rehabilitation and Redevelopment Commission. Criticizing the “Commission's arbitrary condemnation rights...the pressures on small businesses to relocate, and...[coming] higher taxes,” they won and defeated the urban renewal plan for Towson, according to A Pictorial History of Towson. This was 49 year ago, and now a similarly powerful opposition is growing against the proposed light rail expansion in Maryland: the Red and Purple Lines. Thousands of people use the light rail every day, a system which dates back to the governorship of William Donald Schaefer in the 1980s. This article will discuss the power of the light rail lobby and its influence on the political elite while also discussing why the proposal is bad for Marylanders and should not be accepted.

John Porcari, Light Rail Lobby and the Political Elite

In the minds of some Marylanders, big businesses are supporting the light rail expansion because it is an endeavor that has social and environmental merit. To find the real motivations of the business interests, it is important to go back to August 2002 when the final report of the Baltimore
Region Rail System Advisory Committee was issued [2] with the help of numerous big consultants.[1] The committee’s 23 members -- which included developers Struever Bros. Eccles & Rouse and James Wilson's Rouse, the Downtown Partnership of Baltimore, the Greater Baltimore Committee (GBC) and others[2] -- were appointed by then-Secretary of the Maryland Department of Transportation John D. Porcari. They wrote that the light rail expansion would “bring jobs...new opportunities...represents a major investment in...the economic growth of our region” over the next forty years and “should become a starting point in the planning, design and construction of private developments.” Additionally, the Porcari Committee members recommended that big business, along with the state, local and federal government, give money to help construct a multi-billion dollar rail system within 10-12 years.

The layout of the proposed system is revealing. The Red Line would go to the central business district of the city, the Green Line to shopping malls, the Yellow Line to BWI, the Blue Line to the suburbs, the Purple Line through the city, and the Orange Line to Camden Yards. These routes are no surprise given that a major aim of the light rail is to serve major population and employment centers and congested areas, while facilitating mass consumerism, tourism and consumption of entertainment. This is reinforced by a map of the Baltimore metropolitan area, on one of the pages of the report, showing that the proposed light rail expansion mostly connects with major employers and big shopping centers. One quote by a Baltimore real estate tycoon [3], whose company sits on the committee's board, notes the broader implications for the business community, saying this plan will create “neighborhood and business growth in Baltimore.” Near the end of the report, the Porcari Committee recommends that business interests “establish an advocacy group that will continue to monitor and promote implementation of this plan.”

As time passed since 2002, money constraints changed the game. In 2011, the Baltimore Regional Transportation Board (BRTB) put out a draft plan [4] that scraps much of the light rail expansion proposed by the Porcari Committee, removing the Yellow, Orange, Green and Blue lines from consideration. As a result there are only two lines that seem to be debated: the Red Line which goes through the city and Baltimore County and the Purple Line which goes through Montgomery and Prince George's Counties. There are a number of other groups that support the Purple Line [3] and the Red Line as noted in Mayor Sheila Dixon's community compact.[4] But, there are six groups that make up the Light Rail Lobby that are most important:

- the Central Maryland Transportation Alliance (CMTA) sponsored by big banks[5] and comprised of numerous business partners and county authorities,[6]
- Purple Line Now!/Action Committee of Transit (ACT),
- Get Maryland Moving!,
- the Purple Rail Alliance which is supported and led by developers, law groups and high-powered politicians,[7]
- GBC, and
- Red Line Now! PAC.

For some background, Purple Line Now! has the same address as ACT, meaning that both are the same exact organization,[8] even though ACT has a Purple Line propagandist at its head masquerating as a “transit advocate.”[9] Purple Line Now! itself is represented by groups including citizen groups, numerous chambers of commerce, state and local officials and others.[8] Get Maryland Moving! is officially a group trying to find ways to fund transportation projects [5] and a bunch of “transit advocates [6].” In reality it is a group “spearheaded” by the Coalition for Smarter
Growth (CSE) that wholeheartedly supports light rail expansion[10] and is composed of disparate organizations [7] ranging from business groups, citizen advocacy groups, to Young Democrats. Additionally, the CSE is funded by the privatization-friendly [8] Rockefeller Foundation[11] while also receiving money from the Piedmont Environmental Council [9]. This why it would make sense that they were working for the business community [10] which they would easily deny, saying they just want MD to “get the transit investments it needs,” and that “funding decisions don’t happen in a vacuum [11].”[12] Then there is the Red Line Now! PAC some of whose board members have worked with the City government, or sat alongside big businesses on boards of citizen groups.[13]

There are a number of politicians who are on board with the proposed light rail lines as well. The first of these are Prince George's County Executive Rushern Baker and Lt. Governor Anthony Brown, who both spoke [12] at a meeting of the Purple Rail Alliance support it. Rushern Baker expanded on this in a 2011 press release [13] where he was quoted as saying that the Purple Line would “stimulate economic growth and job creation in Prince George’s County.” Back in April, Brown went to Washington D.C. and met with current Deputy Secretary of the US Department of Transportation John Porcari who headed the committee to draft the original light rail expansion plan in 2002, to discuss how the Red Line and the Purple Line, both costing more than $2 billion dollars will be financed. At the time, Brown said [14] that that “the state is considering all options when it comes to private financing...[including] hiring companies to design, build, operate and maintain the transit lines,” exactly what the Porcari Committee recommended. His boss, Governor Martin O'Malley, who is benefiting the corporate sector [15] due to his the massive amount of corporate contributions given to his campaign coffers, endorsed the “controversial” Red Line in 2009 [16], the same year he also gave his blessing to the Purple Line, saying that it will create [17] “a lasting legacy by providing more transportation capacity in a way that protects and preserves existing communities.” At the same time, the Baltimore County Department of Planning endorses the proposed Red Line [18], while the top official of the county, who has received campaign money from Comcast, Constellation Energy, Carefirst Bluecross Blueshield, Pollard Towing and others,[14] business-backed [19] County Executive Kevin Kamenetz has been publicly silent on the light rail expansion, meaning he supports the project.

In fact, Kamenetz did not oppose City Council Resolution No. 25-09 (later it was approved [20]) which asked the "Baltimore County Planning Board to prepare a Red Line Transit Corridor Plan in support of the Red Line Transit Project...[that will] serve as a guide for the integration of a transit project with any potential development of the Red Line corridor" while noting that the Red Line is a “major step in developing a successful regional transit system.” This is nothing new, as in December 2008, Jim Smith, then-County Executive of Baltimore County and Baltimore City Mayor Sheila Dixon endorsed the Red Line [21]. Later, Mayor Dixon restated that she backed this proposal [22], and in 2009, she initiated the a proposal to get the community on board, the Red Line Community Compact. [23] The compact advocates for all of the stakeholders to work together to make sure the proposal is completed, to support the creation of a “public-private entity...to raise funds and mobilize resources towards community revitalization...provide for fair compensation of property owners where right-of-way acquisition is needed,” and so on. Then there is Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, current mayor of Baltimore, who is not a neutral arbitrator [24] on this issue as she favors developers over people [25] like corporate welfare for powerful master developer Michael Beatty,[15] continued the policies of the Dixon Administration including fulfilling the dictates of the community compact and writing that [26] the Red Line “has the potential to revitalize neighborhoods, protect the natural environment and boost economic empowerment. The
position of the city's elite, political and economic came together when Maryland's Department of Transportation and the MTA in early June hosted an industry forum for the Baltimore Red Line, which was attended by Lieutenant Governor Anthony Brown and Rawlings-Blake and a number of the business interests. Other officials also endorse the light rail expansion plan.

The myth and reality of the light rail expansion

There is a gap between the reality of the light rail expansion and what the Light Rail Lobby is saying. After all, groups like ACT/Purple Line Now! consider opposition to Purple Line to be corrupted, saying that “the core energy and funding for these groups comes from 'NIMBY'...opposition” led by the supposedly “evil” agenda of the Columbia County Club. Additionally, GBC President and CEO Donald C. Fry said that “many area commuters are now seeking mass transit alternatives...the Red Line project faces two key challenges – funding and community acceptance.” In order to recognize the reality behind the two proposed light rail lines, it is important to compare what the Light Rail Lobby has said about the project with the reality.

To start out, the Light Rail Lobby says that the Purple Line will encourage economic development in Washington Metropolitan area, promote job creation, cut time for transit riders, encourage thousands to ride transit, reduce pollution, promote a cleaner environment, reduce traffic congestion, and much more. The claim of job creation becomes questionable when the amount of jobs created by this proposed light rail are varied: the Purple Alliance says its 7,000, while the Hyattsville Patch says 7,000 jobs will be collectively created by the Red Line and the Purple Line and Purple Line Now!/ACT says it would create 3,500 construction jobs, along with “thousands” of others. Such variation is troubling, but that's not all.

The Friends of the Crescent Trail points out that the construction of the Purple Line will involve “clear-cutting an existing 20-acre park inside the Beltway,” while increasing air pollution in the Beltway's inner loop, water pollution into the Chesapeake Bay, and noise pollution for nearby residents. Additionally, eighty percent of those that are expected to ride the new Purple Line will come from existing mass transit, taxpayers will pay added costs for construction of the light rail and it will unsafe as a 50 MPH train is whizzing past educational environments. In 2008, residents in Silver Spring voiced similar concerns, as “opposition to the Purple Line grew as residents became concerned about potential effects on traffic, pedestrian safety and noise.” In addition, for each stop of the new light rail there will be a lot of impervious/impermeable surfaces (parking lot, concrete waiting area for light rail, etc...) that have a number of negative effects including “pollution of surface water...flooding of surface water and erosion of stream banks...impermeable surfaces send rainwater into storm drains rather than allow it to percolate down to our aquifers, groundwater may be used faster than it is recharged...Formation of stagnate water puddles...[and the] heat island effect.” This is the same view that resident Berel Gamerman expressed to the Gazette: “they are going to take our last grassy strip and turn it into asphalt. We hate it [the Purple Line]. It should go up Jones Bridge Road. But we don’t have any political clout.” In that same article, another resident, Ella Kaszubski, realizing the light rail would run right next to the Capital Crescent Trail voiced her concern that she uses the trail every day, wants to “keep that access,” angrily saying: “There’s going to be train going through my backyard. It’s going to be a war zone.”

Even the Montgomery County Group of the Sierra Club, while endorsing the Purple Line, said that “bus rapid transit using existing roads between Jones Mill Road and the Medical Center metro station...would preserve the wooded Georgetown Branch right of way between Jones Mill Road and Bethesda,” alluding to the fact that the Purple Line would not do this.
Anne Spielberg, who isn't associated with any particular opposition group, made the boldest, most powerful statement [36] against the light rail: “I'm concerned about the level of traffic, about the level of congestion that it will cause. I'm concerned about the way it's dividing [Seven Oaks-Evanswood] neighborhood. The Purple Line seems to be designed to increase development. It's about helping developers. And we've actually seen statements to that effect from people who are building the Purple Line, instead of doing what makes sense for our neighborhood.”

Then, there's the Red Line which cuts through the center of Baltimore City and into parts of Baltimore County. Advocates of this plan say that the Red Line will create thousands of jobs, is a simple investment in the city for decades to come, while creating a stronger economic future and better quality of life.[20] There are some problems with these claims: Get Maryland Moving says the Red Line will create “create or support a total of 10,000 jobs in the city”[21] while the GBC said that the same light rail expansion would make it “easier for Baltimore area residents to get to jobs, shopping, schools, medical facilities, entertainment and...generate 17,000 construction jobs.”[22] This 7,000 job difference is very troubling.

As a 2009 letter by the West-East Coalition Against Red Line Alternative 4-C argues [37]: “we are absolutely opposed to...the...Red Line...[because of]...the destructive effect that a double-tracked railroad will have on our neighborhoods...heavily-travelled residential streets [will be] even more hazardous for our children and their families.” There is a deeper truth spoken by a member[38] of the Right Rail Coalition named Ben Rosenberg: “the political leadership imposed the Red Line on the city. It’s a big, big plan [that] will absorb all of the city’s transit funds for the next decade.”

Then there's a former transportation planner for the Baltimore City Department of Planning, Gerald Neily writing in the Baltimore Brew[39]: “the proposed Red Line fails because the three-mile-long tunnel from West Baltimore to Boston Street through downtown will consume so much money – $1.2 billion and rising – that it puts the whole project out of reach..The Red Line route...is far too slow for a regional system...As presently designed, the Red Line is an expensive, slow, low-capacity 'money pit' that is also facing citizen opposition in Canton and elsewhere.”

Finally, Nathaniel Payer, the Vice-President of the Transit Riders Action Council of Metropolitan Baltimore (TRAC) says point blank who benefits from the Red Line (Alternative 4C) [40]:

"Governor Martin O'Malley’s choice of light rail Alternative 4C...is the culmination of a seven-year campaign to build a new transit line to suit business and development interests...Support for 4C has come largely from the Greater Baltimore Committee and their affiliate institutions, the city’s movers and shakers. That would be okay, if not for this fact: the Red Line is simply wrong as transit and a wrong decision for Baltimore...The Red Line will be slow...it would actually operate a bit slower than our famously sluggish existing Light Rail...Despite the rhetoric from the GBC and its president, Don Fry, 4C would not do much to connect and integrate Baltimore’s disjointed transit...If the MTA’s new, larger Red Line ridership projections are to be believed...the proposed east-west line could quickly max out...One of the promises made by Red Line boosters is that this kind of transit stimulates development. That’s actually not very likely, unfortunately, in this case.

An alternative transit plan

Alternatives to the Red Line and the Purple Line have been proposed. Starting with the Red Line,
B'More Mobile, one of the signatories to Dixon's Community Compact, supports the proposal but asks website readers: “why spend 2.5 billion dollars on the proposed 14.1 mile Red Line, with 19 stations, when it would make much more sense to plan for and put some money into other more flexible and affordable ways to transport the public?” This question is answered in numerous ways. Nathaniel Payer, the Vice-President of the Transit Riders Action Council of Metropolitan Baltimore (TRAC) wrote in the Baltimore Brew that there should be an initiation of an “expanded, supplementary Alternative Analysis to look at all reasonable options, including heavy rail and alternate alignments that would provide superior transit value, integrate into our neighborhoods, and have a competitive cost-effectiveness rating.”

The strongest alternative has been articulated by the Right Rail Coalition which wants streetcar network in Baltimore to add onto the Red Line: “the group is calling for a streetcar network, running on city roads, to replace the eastern leg of the Red Line – a plan that follows the streetcar-building programs underway in Washington, D.C., and other cities.” Gerald Neily added onto this, in his detailed analysis, saying that:

“Baltimore can have a rail transit system that accommodates light-rail and streetcar vehicles on the same lines, if not always in the same places, to take advantage of the best of both...Streetcars are the solution. Not only are they far less expensive and more convenient than light rail, but because using surface streetcars for a portion of the Red Line corridor can enable the rest of the line to be built in a far more effective and integrated way – and at a far more reasonable price...By adopting an integrated approach, Baltimore could have the true rail transit system it has wanted for decades and would follow the innovative systems now being built in places like Los Angeles, Portland, San Francisco and neighboring Washington, D.C.

On twitter, Dave R gave me some background: “streetcars were excellent mass transport in Bmore for decades [but that] Henry Barnes got rid of them. Then he moved to NYC...[he] was Baltimore' traffic commissioner in the late 1950s.”

The opposition to the Purple Line is not as strong, but there is still a number of alternatives. Grassroots neighborhood opposition to the proposal in 2008 had residents calling for the train to go underground, as the route on the street seemed too disruptive: “We believe in transit. ... But the more we learned about the potential impacts on the neighborhood, we just couldn’t support the street-level route.” Four months ago, a recently-elected Councilman in the Town of Chevy Chase said that the Purple Line was “misguided and not thought through,” while questioning if it was less costly than creating a Bus Rapid Transit lanes between the cities of Silver Spring and Bethesda.

A call to action

Those fighting this proposal have a steep curve to climb. In addition, as widely influential UK professor and social theorist David Harvey wrote in his famous essay, A View From Federal Hill:

""
Baltimore’s urban elite...have tried to create a profitable growth machine that has focused on tourism leisure, and conspicuous consumption as an antidote to falling profits and urban decline...The close public-private partnership forged between City Hall and dominant corporate power helped turn Baltimore into an entrepreneurial city that fared rather better in a highly competitive world than some of its rivals.

The Light Rail Lobby groups have lot of power, making it seem monumental to challenge these vested interests in a city with a black ruling elite. Already, it seems the light rail expansion serves the interests of wealthy capitalists as noted earlier. Providing alternatives to this plan does not mean one is against mass transit, but that the system that is implemented should be put in place dictated by the ideas of the populace, not the business community. Opponents of this lobby must co-opt their foes, by offering altered versions of the light rail expansion plan with ideas like a streetcar network, or tunnels underground, so those supporting it will come to the negotiating table. Overall, the best approach would be to push for a streetcar network that would replace part of the Red Line while pushing for the city government to issue an alternative analysis on “superior transit options” other than the light rail for the areas that the two rail lines will cover. In conclusion, we must ask ourselves David Harvey's [46] simple question to concerned citizens: how would you design the city?

NOTES:

[1]RK&K, Parsons Brinckerhoff owned by an English multinational infrastructure company, a full service planning firm named Whitman, Requardt and Associates; Kramer & Associates and Remline Corp which says the light rail transit plan is an example of "strategic marketing" on [47] their website [47] maybe because they are paid to promote the Red Line [48].

[2] UMBC; Johns Hopkins Hospital; then-mayor of Annapolis; League of Women Voters of Baltimore County; Vice Chairman of the Baltimore County Delegation to the Maryland House of Delegates; SEIU Local 1199E-DC; Baltimore City Office of Transportation; Transit Riders League [49] of Metropolitan Baltimore; Harford County Department of Zoning; then-Republican Whip of the House of Delegates; Morgan State University; Maryland Department of Planning; Washington Village-Pigtown Neighborhood Planning Council; Howard County Public Transportation Board; Koinonia Baptist Church; former Delegate who is currently a lawyer; EarthTech Inc.; Nottingham Properties, and a member of the Maryland Senate's Budget and Taxation Committee.

[3]Chesapeake Bay Foundation, four AFL-CIO affiliated unions, Casa De Maryland, the Chesapeake Climate Action Network, Environment Maryland, Natural Resources Defense Council, two Sierra Club chapters, and many more [50].

[4] AFSCME, B'More Mobile, Baltimore Development Corporation (BDC), UNITEHERE, Citizens Planning & Housing Association (CPHA), the Waterfront Partnership and many more [23].


If you don’t believe me, go ahead and search “PO BOX 7074 SILVER SPRING MD 20907-7074.” On top of this, there is a letter from the IRS from 2008 telling Purple Line Now! that they are a tax exempt organization solidifying this connection.

ACT’s leader, Tina Slater is on a task force, which is more specifically “a public/private partnership with 15 members appointed by the County Executive and chaired by Mark Winston, a lawyer in private practice with the firm of Glazer Winston Honigman Ellick, PLLC...comprised of civic leaders, transit advocates, environmental advocates, representatives of local chambers of commerce, business executives, real estate developers, transportation professionals, and representatives of federal, state, county, and municipal governmental agencies” and in the end put out a report “establishing a 160-mile...rapid transit system that creates a comprehensive transit network.”

http://www.purplelinenow.com/our_board.html

https://twitter.com/burkelyh/status/370002523618152448


http://ww2.gazette.net/stories/071608/takonew200339_32363.shtml [44]

https://extension.udel.edu/factsheet/permeable-vs-impermeable-surfaces/ [72]
[65] https://beyondbarricade.wordpress.com/2013/01/03/the-first-investigation-kevin-kamenetz/
[66] https://beyondbarricade.wordpress.com/2013/01/02/why-would-kamenetz-want-to-close-the-park/
[71] http://www.getmarylandmoving.org/lets-build-them-purple-line/
[72] https://extension.udel.edu/factsheet/permeable-vs-impermeable-surfaces/
[77] http://www.getmarylandmoving.org/lets-build-them-red-line/