

Is Gaithersburg West a Sleeping Giant? Part Three

The problem with the Gaithersburg West Master Plan is not its density or its jobs. Both represent part of Montgomery County's future whether nervous neighbors want them or not. Rather, the plan's greatest flaw is its reliance on a set of transportation projects that may never be built.

The plan's density increases are tied to a series of new transportation projects through a "staging" process. As progress is made on funding, building and completing these projects, the plan will allow more commercial square footage in a series of steps. The most expensive transportation projects called for by the plan include:

1. A realigned Corridor Cities Transitway (CCT) that is one mile longer, looks like an "S" and contains five stations in the Life Sciences Center (LSC). The original alignment contained three stations on a more direct route along the LSC's northern edge.

2. Seven grade-separated interchange projects:

- Sam Eig Highway at Diamondback Drive
- Sam Eig Highway at Great Seneca Highway
- Great Seneca Highway at Key West Avenue
- I-270 at Watkins Mill Road
- Key West Avenue at Shady Grove Road
- Great Seneca Highway at Muddy Branch Road
- Quince Orchard Road at Great Seneca Highway

The first four projects were proposed by the 1990 Shady Grove Study Area Master Plan. Twenty years later, they are still unbuilt. After the draft Gaithersburg West Master Plan was released, the planning staff [decided](#) that the Great Seneca/Key West interchange project was unnecessary, leaving six projects still proposed.

It is extremely unlikely that all of these projects will be constructed for the following reasons.

CCT

In a recent [analysis](#), the General Assembly's Department of Legislative Services (DLS) described the condition of the state's Transportation Trust Fund (TTF) as so emaciated that the state would have to pick just one of its three proposed transit lines to fund. In 2008, the Governor signaled his rank order of preference among the projects by [cutting planning funding](#) by 7% for the Red Line, 19% for the Purple Line and 47% for the CCT. Furthermore, the lead planner for the Maryland Transit Administration was formerly [on the payroll](#) of the Greater Baltimore Committee for the explicit purpose of advocating for a light-rail Red Line.

The Red Line serves two important jurisdictions – Baltimore City and Baltimore County. The Purple Line serves two other important jurisdictions – Montgomery and Prince George's Counties. The CCT serves just Montgomery County in its current form as a link between Clarksburg and Shady Grove. It could conceivably be extended someday to Frederick, but the circuitous route recommended by the Gaithersburg West plan may

make it less attractive to Frederick transit riders than a rapid bus route straight down I-270. The greater density contained in the Gaithersburg West plan helps the CCT's federal cost-effectiveness ratings, but the politics rank it as third in line. That means it could take a long, LONG time to get built.

Transportation Funding

Your author has written [again](#) and [again](#) and [again](#) and [again](#) about the utter failure of Annapolis to adequately fund transportation. Now, the General Assembly's staff openly [admits](#) that the state will have trouble affording *any* new projects. And yet the Gaithersburg West Master Plan relies on six new grade-separated interchanges. Former Secretary of Transportation John Porcari once told your author that each new interchange project costs an average \$150 million, meaning that the density staged in the plan will require hundreds of millions of dollars of state road construction money that are not there.

MoCo's Existing Needs

Let's put aside the inexcusable indolence of the Lazy Lords of Annapolis for a moment and imagine that they someday raise revenues for transportation. Montgomery County already has tremendous needs above and beyond the improvements in the Gaithersburg West plan that are crying out for funding. First, the county is the recipient of the ICC, a subject of some jealousy by other jurisdictions. Second, the county wants both the Purple Line and the CCT. Third, the county has a long wish-list of other [smaller, but worthy improvements](#) that run into the hundreds of millions of dollars. (Just one of them is an interchange in the Gaithersburg West plan.) Fourth, the county wants the state to rebuild Rockville Pike as an "urban boulevard" as part of its [White Flint Sector Plan](#). Fifth, the county wants Beltway widening between the I-270 Spur and Virginia. And sixth, the county is asking for the mother of all widening projects: the \$4+ billion I-270 lane additions. Will all of this give way to Gaithersburg West? And will the rest of the state roll over so that only MoCo's transportation needs are met?

The Maryland Department of Transportation (MDOT) became so alarmed by the expense of the Gaithersburg West improvements – which of course will require state financing – that they sent an [unusual letter](#) to the county decrying them. MDOT estimated the total cost of the new Gaithersburg West infrastructure at \$1.3 billion and the total cost of MoCo's existing requests at more than \$7 billion. MDOT said, "Given the current economic and fiscal climate, we suggest that a financial feasibility analysis be added as part of this document to fully demonstrate the viability of the proposed development program." Translation: we can't afford it. Council President Nancy Floreen, who is a former Planning Board Member and is the current Chair of the council's transportation committee, remarked on [Facebook](#), "This is the first time that I can recall that the State has weighed in at this level on a master plan."

All of the above makes plain that the plan's potential depends on transportation projects that may never be built. That means that the jobs desired by supporters and the high-rises detested by opponents may never materialize. But this applies only so long as the plan's staging requirements are retained and there is the problem. A future County Council could very well be tempted to abandon the staging and proceed with more density anyway. (The current council just did that in [Germantown](#).) That would be a mistake in Gaithersburg West as no one believes that the area's current transportation


capacity is adequate to handle the additional density called for by the new plan. No current council can ever make commitments on behalf of a future council so the possibility cannot be ruled out.

The county is justifiably interested in allowing more job creation throughout its land area outside of the Agricultural Reserve. But rather than planning jobs near hypothetical – if not imaginary – infrastructure, the county should focus dense development in locations with existing infrastructure, publicly-owned land and [already-programmed capital projects](#). White Flint, which has an existing Metro station and is near the impending Rockville Pike-Montrose interchange project, is one example. Downtown Wheaton, which also has a Metro station plus a WMATA lot, a county-owned services center building and a large county-owned parking lot – all of which can be redeveloped – is another. Glenmont, which is near a Metro station, the impending Georgia Avenue-Randolph Road interchange project and a new county-financed parking garage project, is yet another example. All of them have substantial real-life assets to offer in the cause of transit-oriented development.

Gaithersburg West *should* have more jobs, but only in line with a realistic view of what its transportation capacity is likely to be in the future. Realism about state transportation funding is nowhere to be found in the current plan. The master plan needs a big dose of that prior to County Council approval.

We will conclude with the politics of this issue in Part Four.

[Summary only...](#)

Posted by Adam Pagnucco at [7:00 AM](#) [0 comments](#) 

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