

January 20, 2010

Ms. Nancy Floreen
President, Montgomery County Council
100 Maryland Ave.
Rockville, MD 20850

Subject: Funding Sources to Prevent Ride-On Cuts

Dear Ms. Floreen:

The Action Committee for Transit strongly opposes the proposed cuts in Ride-On service. These cuts will severely impact the lives of thousands of county residents who depend on Ride-On to get to work, to shop, to school, and to everywhere their daily lives take them. And when the county seeks to create a more sustainable infrastructure, it would be unconscionable to shrink the transit network while we continue to expand the road network.

We recognize that this is a time of fiscal stringency. For that reason, ACT has developed specific recommendations for permanently funding the maintenance of Ride-On service. We recommend that savings be obtained in the following areas:

1) **Bus priorities** – Significant cost savings can be obtained by moving Ride-On buses faster. Not only does this save money, but it actually improves the quality of service for passengers. Paying salary to a bus driver who sits at a backed-up traffic light is pure waste – it is actually worse than waste, since it makes the rider's trip slower.

On December 7, 2008, ACT sent a [letter](#) to the county identifying ten specific intersections where buses could be moved faster, without any capital expenditure required. We are still waiting for a substantive reply to this letter. And the intersections discussed in the letter are just the low-hanging fruit – there are many more places in the county where cost savings are available.

2) **Lot 31 garage** – The Bethesda Parking District plans an \$89 million underground garage at Lot 31. This garage was always oversized and overpriced, and the need for additional daytime parking in this location has now evaporated entirely – the garage across the street does not fill up. We [recommend](#) that the planned garage be downsized to a single level, to replace the existing parking lot. The savings could be used to fund Ride-On in the same way as was done with the funds from higher parking fees last July. The parking tax in Bethesda would be reduced to zero, and the county mass transit tax would be increased to yield an equivalent amount of tax revenue.

3) **Costco** – The \$4 million subsidy for a Costco store near the Wheaton Metro is ill-advised, and the money would be far better spent on Ride-On service.

Furthermore, building the Costco store as designed would undercut the county's economic development strategy. The Washington area, like the rest of the United States, has a surplus of regional shopping malls and an undersupply of housing in mixed-use areas near mass transit. The construction business can only be restarted by encouraging the supply of product for which there is unmet demand. That is transit-oriented development, especially housing. We need to propel the county economy forward by encouraging the transformation of Wheaton Plaza into a lively urban center that will enhance its surroundings and stimulate more economic growth.

The Wheaton Plaza property is among the tiny number of parcels in the county that can be redeveloped by right for mixed-use housing and retail. The [change in zoning rules](#) that allowed the enormously successful Bethesda Lane project on the site of a former Giant supermarket on Arlington Road also applies to the portions of Wheaton Plaza that are not close to single-family residences. By-right zoning confers a great economic advantage over the less reliable "optional method" that the county generally uses for mixed-use development. The county should be doing everything it can to encourage the landowner to take advantage of the unique opportunity the zoning of this property provides. We should not waste money trying to prop up an obsolete and economically unsustainable form of land use that is incompatible with its urban surroundings.

Bus priorities and elimination of the Bethesda Parking Tax provide a permanent source of savings that will sustain Ride-On in future budget years. We recognize that there is a need for immediate savings in this fiscal year. However, once we have identified the permanent source of funds, timing issues can be solved. For example, a few months of delay in highway repaving and similar projects can be used to fill current year budget gaps, if there is a source of funding in future years to repay the money that is thus "borrowed" and bring repaving intervals back to normal. Our three savings recommendations can provide the needed assurance of repayment.

The County Council must keep faith with the thousands of Montgomery County residents who have arranged their lives around our extensive Ride-On system. We must give the preservation of bus service the high priority it deserves, even in these difficult times. Maintaining the current level of bus service is essential, and it is doable.

Sincerely,

\signed\

Ben Ross
President