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Purple Line has taken a circuitous path

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ANNAPOLIS -- Deep in Gov. Parris N. Glendening's \$19.7 billion operating budget proposal is \$6 million to complete an environmental study of the proposed Georgetown Branch light rail line linking Bethesda and Silver Spring.

It sounds like a simple enough proposition -- and a drop in the bucket, given the size of the governor's spending plan. The concept of a rail link between the two downtowns has been around for 15 years, and a final study could determine the feasibility of the project once and for all.

But nothing has been simple where the Georgetown Branch is concerned.

The light rail proposal -- which is sometimes referred to anachronistically as a trolley -- has been the topic of endless debate in Rockville, Annapolis and Washington, a debate tinged with class warfare. It has become one of the most intensely lobbied issues in the State House, frequently at a sub rosa level. It has energized neighborhood groups that oppose the idea and transit advocates who like it. It has divided the environmental community. And it has politicized one of Montgomery County's most exclusive country clubs.

Meanwhile, way off on the horizon is something called the Purple Line, which transit planners have quietly explored for years. It was first discussed publicly by Glendening in the final days of his 1998 re-election campaign. Conceptually, it is an extension of Metrorail, running somewhere from Rock Spring Park in Bethesda to at least New Carrollton, and possibly all the way to Oxon Hill. It would cost billions of dollars to build.

The Georgetown Branch trolley and the Purple Line are not one and the same. But the trolley, if it is ever built, could become the first piece of the Purple Line puzzle because it would cover part of the envisioned Purple Line route.

So inevitably, in the minds of the politicians and the planners and the advocates, the two projects have become at least tenuously linked. In fact, Joel D. Rozner, the State House lobbyist for an anti-trolley group called Committee to Save the Trail, is using the Purple Line as an argument to delay or kill funding for the final light rail study.

"Why would you spend \$6 million of taxpayer money until you know whether or not there's a feasibility to the longer line?" he said. "The real question is, what is this project? Is it a 4 1/2-mile trolley, or is it the Purple Line?"

The answers to those questions will not be known for several years, if ever. But as budget leaders in the state Senate and the House of Delegates prepare to negotiate terms of the trolley funding this week, there are lessons to be learned in the Georgetown Branch history for friends and foes of the Purple Line. And political ramifications to consider.

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Genesis of a plan

The debate has ensnared every big name in Maryland politics, past and present, from William Donald Schaefer to

Image

The County Council inserted the trolley in the county master plan in 1989, saying the right of way also should be developed as a hiker-biker trail. The county now owns three quarters of the 4.4-mile route.

The bike path quickly became a well-established and popular destination and is part of the Capital Crescent Trail that links Montgomery County to Georgetown. And the trolley proposal seemed to be gaining momentum as well. Gov. Schaefer, who was trying to get light rail built in Baltimore, offered Montgomery County \$70 million for the Georgetown Branch.

"The project was promised by Gov. Schaefer in the first term of his administration," recalled Del. Dana Lee Dembrow (D-Dist. 20) of Silver Spring, a trolley advocate. "It was promised for Montgomery County's support for a gas tax increase to pay for the Baltimore light rail (state gas taxes fund all transportation projects in Maryland). That was two gas tax increases ago."

Several things happened to stall the project. Kramer was defeated by Neal Potter, a lukewarm trolley supporter, in the bitter 1990 Democratic primary for county executive. The state economy went south, making government funding scarce. But most significant, a sleeping giant was awakened.

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Solid opposition

In the long history of the trolley debate, several names in the opposition movement come up again and again. At the top of the list is Hurson, who is now the powerful House majority leader in Annapolis.

For years, Hurson (D-Dist. 18) of Chevy Chase has been active in the Greater Bethesda-Chevy Chase Coalition, which helped him launch his political career. The organization's board of directors is a veritable who's who of Montgomery County players. It includes Patricia S. Baptiste, the frontrunner in next month's special County Council election to replace Betty Ann Krahnke (R-Dist. 1) of Chevy Chase; Beverly Denbo, who is associated with Committee for Montgomery; Catherine Titus, a Republican activist and donor whose husband, Roger, is a well-connected Rockville lawyer; and I. Dean Ahmad, a national expert on ballot access laws.

The coalition begat the Committee to Save the Trail. Anthony Czajkowski, a former chairman of the coalition, is now chairman of COST. COST volunteers have been raising money and collecting petition signatures in their ongoing campaign to defeat the trolley. And COST hired Joel Rozner, a former top aide to Glendening in Prince George's County and one of the most respected lobbyists in Annapolis, to further its cause in the State House.

Czajkowski, Hurson and Ira Shesser, chairman of the GBCCC, also helped launch a political action committee called SMARTPAC -- Smart Alternatives for Rail Transport. Czajkowski is the current chairman; Shesser is the former treasurer, and Hurson is the first contributor listed on the PAC's first campaign finance statement in 1990.

But behind all these groups is the Columbia Country Club, the regal oasis at the busy intersection of Connecticut Avenue and East-West Highway -- whose golf course would be bisected by a rail line.

"It affects our major asset, which is our golf course," said Vincent Burke III, the country club president. "If the transitway becomes a reality, our golf course is ruined."

The country club sits on a gold mine: property valued at almost \$6.8 million, according to records at the state Department of Assessment and Taxation.

Through the years, the country club has taken on almost mythic proportions in the debate over the trolley. To advocates of the transitway, it is the windmill against which they must tilt, a great and powerful Oz controlling dozens of pliant politicians behind the scenes.

To retaliate in the early 1990s, Dana Dembrow -- who may be the closest thing the legislature has to a Don Quixote -- introduced a bill that would have taken away the tax break Maryland country clubs receive for preserving agricultural land with their golf courses. It went nowhere.

Burke works for Furey, Doolan and Abel, a Chevy Chase law firm whose partners have contributed to SMARTPAC. One partner, Devin J. Doolan, is a well-known lobbyist in both Rockville and Annapolis. In years past, his client list has included the Columbia Country Club.

Burke said the 1,500-member club is merely working with other groups in the neighborhood that oppose the project.

"We kind of follow their lead and try to be supportive," he said.

But the club has been the main source of income for the PAC, which raised and distributed more than \$21,000 in 1990, sending contributions to powerful Annapolis lawmakers.