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Chevy Chase retains law firm for Purple Line fight

Sidley Austin will work pro bono, review state report on connector options

by Andrew Ujifusa | Staff Writer



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The Town of Chevy Chase Town Council is retaining a law firm to analyze a state report on the Purple Line.

Mayor Kathy Strom said the firm will be looking through the Alternatives Analysis/ Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) released last month by the Maryland Transit Administration to see "how the draft complies or does not comply with statute." The report analyzed several options for the Purple Line mass transit project, which would connect Bethesda to New Carrollton.

The firm will also help the town draft its own response to the DEIS, which is due Jan. 14. "I think there were real problems there," Strom said, referring to the report.

The council voted unanimously on Thursday to hire the Washington, D.C., firm Sidley Austin on a pro-bono basis.

Most residents in attendance Thursday seemed ready for a showdown over the controversial project.

"Let's kind of go after them," resident Andy Hill said.

"You've really got the town behind you," David Saltzman told council members.

"We need to fight them," Joe Steeds said, adding that "given the magnitude of the issue" the town should not be overly concerned with costs at this point.

Town leaders have argued that a light-rail project along the Capital Crescent Trail, which runs along the northern border of the town, is not the best option for the MTA to consider. They have pushed for a closer examination of a rapid-bus route along Jones Bridge Road, further north of the town.

Hill, Saltzman and other residents who spoke said the value of the trail meant that hiring legal representation was an important step.

In a later interview, Strom said that the town had made no decision about filing any lawsuits based on the DEIS.



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So far, the town has paid \$374,000 to Sam Schwartz, a New York engineer who has generated his own reports on the Purple Line for the town and has been critical of the MTA's analyses.

Councilman Al Lang said that factoring in future payments to Sam Schwartz and other expenses, including \$4,000 in administrative expenses for hiring Sidley Austin, the total amount spent by the town related to the Purple Line is \$434,000.

"I do worry about budgeting and how monies are spent going forward," Lang said.

While Strom said she was not sure if more money would be spent on the Purple Line beyond what has been budgeted, Councilman David Lublin said the town had "actually hit a balance" in its spending, given what some residents against the light rail were demanding.

Firuzeh McLean said putting a light rail next to the Capital Crescent Trail would destroy the diversity of groups that enjoy the trail, from senior citizens to families with young children.

"Do you really think we're going to bring our kids on the trail ever again?" she said.

A few residents expressed skepticism about hiring legal counsel. Jacob Bardin called the decision to retain Sidley Austin "really inappropriate."

"We all know that we need more public transportation," he said.

Jean Buegler said even if the work by Sam Schwartz and Sidley Austin on behalf of the town improved the final Purple Line project, the town was still acting improperly.

"I feel like it's not the town's responsibility to do that," Buegler said.

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