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Planning agency objects to proposed Capital Beltway, I-270 expansion

Officials say proposal would leave transit unfunded, damage environment

BY BRIANA ADHIKUSUMA [FOLLOW @BRIADHIKUSUMA](#) FEBRUARY 4, 2021 | 6:43 PM



The Capital Beltway near the I-270 interchange in Bethesda

FILE PHOTO

A regional planning agency objects to Maryland highway officials' plans to expand the Capital Beltway and I-270, saying the proposal would "shortchange transit and inflict unnecessary damage to parkland while increasing emissions from vehicles."

The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC) on Wednesday reiterated its concerns and anticipated issues with the project. The commission issued a press release in response to the state's announcement on Jan. 27 that it chose a [four-lane "high occupancy toll" design for its widening project](#) on I-270 and I-495, or the Capital Beltway.

The build alternative — also referred to as Alternative 9 — would add two “high occupancy toll” (HOT) lanes across the American Legion Bridge to I-270 and north on I-270 to I-370.

But the alternative was chosen before the Maryland Department of Transportation State Highway Administration provided official responses to public comments on the project’s Draft Environmental Impact Statement. Government officials, environmental activists and some in the the community have criticized the DEIS, saying the project could harm the environment, parkland and homes, and reduce property values.

Casey Anderson, the M-NCPPC’s vice chair and Montgomery County Planning Board chair, said in Wednesday’s news release that any alternative that does not include substantial support for transit from toll revenue is a “non-starter.”

“For months MDOT has been saying that revenue for transit would be included in the project, but they have yet to make any commitment to actually making it happen,” he said. “Allowing buses to use the new toll lanes is not going to cut it — this project needs to get serious about support for transit.”

Elizabeth Hewlett, chair of both M-NCPPC and the Prince George’s County Planning Board, said in the release that the agency is “extremely disappointed” in the state’s choice, which offers “nothing to reduce the need for more cars.”

“As stewards of the environment and important community assets, we are experienced in crafting sound land use and transportation policies for Montgomery and Prince George’s Counties,” she said. “It’s just indefensible that the state’s proposal ignores our recommendations to use part of the toll revenue to fund transit as part of a strategy to minimize the amount of land — including parkland — that will be paved.”

In a phone interview with Bethesda Beat on Jan. 27, Anderson said officials were blindsided by the announcement since the state and county were in the middle of addressing the county's concerns about the plans.

Anderson called the state's intentions into question — whether it was trying to collaborate or unilaterally decide what to do regardless of local input.

State officials have said they will respond to substantive comments in the study's Final Environmental Impact Statement and Record of Decision, which will be completed in the fall.

The purpose of the project is to relieve traffic congestion. The alternative would also add a bicycle and pedestrian connection across the American Legion Bridge. The project's construction will first start with the bridge.

Buses and vehicles with three or more people will be able to travel the new HOT lanes for free. Drivers traveling alone would have to pay if they used the managed lanes.

The Managed Lanes Study focuses on the bridge and I-270 as Phase 1 South.