

Considering transit, again

By: [Joe Nathanson](#) September 19, 2019



The Greater Baltimore Committee's recent transportation summit once again placed a spotlight on the need for the Baltimore area to invest in infrastructure critical to the region's economic progress. The program featured a panel of speakers providing national, state and regional perspectives. The larger message was to call for bold action. But there was also recognition of the pragmatism associated with making incremental progress.

The first speaker intimated as much. Rodney E. Slater, U.S. secretary of transportation in the Clinton administration, starting with the national outlook, referred to the "bickering" that allows other nations to overtake us. (Think high-speed intercity trains in Europe and Asia). Our "political impasse" puts us in a "very threatening position."

Slater suggested that when we listened later in the panel about local initiatives, we would be hearing a lot about system preservation, that is, spending billions to maintain the roads, bridges and other facilities that we already have.

Those local initiatives were presented by Michael B. Kelley, executive director at the Baltimore Metropolitan Council, and Kevin B. Quinn, administrator of the Maryland Transit Administration.

The BMC, serving as staff to the Baltimore Regional Transportation Board, is now in the process of developing the region's long-range plan for all forms of surface transportation. And that plan, Maximize2045, reveals that emphasis on system preservation cited by Slater.

Referring to the financial plan for transportation investments to be made from 2024 to 2045, \$37 billion is estimated for operating the system, \$16 billion for maintaining the system and \$12 billion, or just 18.5% of the total, for building and expanding the network of roadways, bridges and myriad transit facilities.

To put matters in perspective, constructing just a new four-lane highway in an urban area costs \$8 million to \$10 million per mile.

Conserving assets

The Maximize2045 plan may represent a very prudent handling of our existing transportation assets, but it shows how limited we are in advancing transformative initiatives.

The theme of conserving existing assets was also reflected in Kevin Quinn's presentation of the MTA's capital needs inventory. Using a 10-year planning horizon, Quinn reported a total of \$5.7 billion in capital needs.

He separates those capital needs into two categories: those required to maintain a "state of good repair" (\$4.6 billion) and those expenditures that afford an enhancement of existing facilities (\$1.1 billion).

Having established those needs, the MTA administrator informed us that there is a funding gap of nearly \$2 billion. The gap is calculated by taking identified needs less anticipated revenues, with a shortage of \$953 million for state of good repair projects and an even greater gap of \$1.018 billion in funds to implement enhancement projects.

About a week prior to the GBC event, I had a chance to interview Quinn by phone. Despite the constraints presented by limited resources, he seems buoyed by the positive steps that can be taken.

He described the MTA as being "nimble," exemplified by the new bus routes set up to serve Tradeport Atlantic site in Sparrows Point and the new Guinness brewery in Halethorpe. He also cited a couple of "very cool" projects: the new Camden Station passenger facility serving both MARC commuter and Light Rail trains and new amenities for the BWI Amtrak/ MARC station further down the line.

Quinn was also pleased to report that real-time arrival information, available via your smart phone, is now fully implemented for all local bus routes.

Transformative ideas

Still, one gets from both the Kelly and Quinn presentations that we will come up short in meeting the region's growth and mobility needs unless some major new directions are taken.

In particular, the BMC projections indicate that the region will gain another 440,000 jobs over the next quarter century and population will grow by 300,000 over that period. That indicates higher flows of traffic into the region to fill those jobs. But the transportation analysts indicate that only 50% of those new jobs will be accessible by public transit.

Referring to this unsatisfactory situation, one of the slides in Quinn's presentation asserts "We Can Change This." Perhaps that's where the Central Maryland Regional Transit Plan comes in. The plan, established by the Maryland General Assembly, will define public transportation goals over the next 25 years.

The project partners include the RTP Commission, regional transit providers, subject matter experts, BMC, and the general public. A draft plan is scheduled to be released in April 2020 and the final recommendations issued in October 2020.

Will the RTP heed Rodney Slater's call for bold action? Or, will we see a continuation of incremental, but less than transformative enhancements that we have been accustomed to? There is a year of demanding work ahead before we have an answer to that question.

Joe Nathanson is the not-quite-retired principal of Urban Information Associates, a Baltimore-based economic and community development consulting firm. He writes a monthly column for The Daily Record and can be contacted at urbaninfo@comcast.net.