

The Gazette

Silver Spring forum plumbs pros and cons of Purple Line

By Ryan Marshall

March 4, 2015

It's the best of projects, it's the worst of projects.

To paraphrase Dickens, that was the picture painted by a supporter and an opponent of the Purple Line at a forum Monday night in Silver Spring on the proposed \$2.45 billion, 16-mile light-rail project that would link Bethesda and New Carrollton.

On the one hand, the project would be a partial solution to the Washington, D.C., region's transit problems and a business generator. But on the other hand, detractors say, it's too expensive and won't deliver on the cost to build it.

The Purple Line is currently under review by the state Department of Transportation.

Gov. Larry Hogan (R) said he hopes to make a decision on the project — expected to cost \$55 million a year to operate and maintain — by May, according to The Washington Post.

While the pros and cons were later heard inside the AFI Silver Theater and Cultural Center, demonstrators gathered outside before the forum, holding signs and shouting their support for the project.

The project will bring economic stimulus and environmental benefits, said Nick Brand of Chevy Chase Section 3, who wore a purple scarf around his neck to fend off the March wind as he waved a sign along Colesville Road.

Brand said he believes that if the state takes a fair and honest look at the project, it will decide that it's crucial to Montgomery County's future.

The forum featured a debate between Rich Parsons, vice chairman of the Suburban Maryland Transportation Alliance, and Randal O'Toole, a visiting fellow with the Maryland Public Policy Institute and a senior fellow with the Cato Institute. Parsons favors the project, while O'Toole opposes it.

About 75 people attended the forum, said Christopher Summers, president of the nonprofit Maryland Public Policy Institute, which sponsored the event and cost \$45 to attend. Most of the questions from the audience were directed at Parsons, challenging his assertions.

The Purple Line will be good for transportation and the environment, plus bring economic benefits, and any could damage the viability of the project, said Parsons, a former CEO of the Montgomery County Chamber of Commerce.

“We literally are on the 1-yard line and ready to score here,” he said.

The line will lead to more transit riders and faster trips, and take nearly 16,800 vehicle trips per day off the region’s crowded roads, he said.

The line also will connect Montgomery, Maryland’s most populous county, with the state’s flagship university in College Park and let businesspeople travel from Silver Spring to New York via the Acela train in New Carrollton without having to drive their cars, he said.

Parsons argued that the public-private partnership also will lead to redevelopment around its 21 stations, with 31 projects somehow tied to the Purple Line already underway.

If the state doesn’t move forward with the project now, it will be missing out on \$1.8 billion in investments, and every year it’s delayed will add significantly to the cost, Parsons said.

O’Toole argued that light-rail projects virtually never achieve what they’re projected to and often cost significantly more than expected.

Buses can move more people than trains because they can run more frequently than trains, he said.

The Washington region has some of the least-used buses in the country, averaging just more than 10 passengers apiece, he said.

“If you can’t fill your buses, why do you need trains?” he said.

Parsons argued that the Washington region is different from other regions that might have capacity on their roads to run more buses, while this region’s roads are already crowded.

He cited maintenance issues on the Metrorail system, including ones that led to an incident in January in which a passenger died from smoke inhalation in a tunnel and a 2009 crash on the Red Line that killed nine people.

A region shouldn’t build more rail when it can’t maintain what it has, O’Toole said.

He also argued that light rail doesn’t stimulate economic development, pointing to the struggles of Portland, Ore., to attract development around its system.

Investments in development around Metro stations has worked out well for the Washington area, Parsons countered.