

March 3, 2021

Good afternoon, Speaker of the House Jones and Chair Barve,

I urge you to support House Bill 510, An Act Concerning Transportation – Private Sector Transportation Projects Ombudsman – Establishment, sponsored by Delegate Valentino-Smith.

There is a crucial need for the office of Maryland Department of Transportation (MDOT) ombudsman to be *created by statute*--not an MDOT office that may be shut down depending on the leadership of the agency or other unanticipated exigencies. Residents need this ombudsman to oversee the many state transportation projects underway and lining up in the queue to allow them to voice their issues and concerns in a meaningful way. Private equity firms and corporations engaged in transportation projects associated with toll roads, trains, and public transportation are focused only on profit and minimally concerned about the residents and Maryland taxpayers, whom they consider only insofar as they have to be dealt with on the way to gaining approval for their projects. However, it is the directly affected residents and state taxpayers who assume the potential environmental and financial risks.

*My concern is that the date the bill would take effect is indicated as October 1, 2021. The Purple Line has been upended and is in a reorganization phase. The Beltway Expansion project is being aggressively pushed forward post-draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The SCMaglev draft EIS is currently open for comment, with a deadline of April 22, 2021. Therefore, I suggest an earlier date would be more prudent for the establishment of an ombudsman to be effective to tackle these and other transportation projects. Having a ombudsman designated by statute “to respond to concerns, complaints, and other inquiries” of all interested parties is vital to try to bring some order to the current chaos.*

I am particularly concerned about the proposed SCMaglev project, a deeply disconcerting conundrum, both for you and your constituents. We also face a complicated set of competing proposed transportation projects, including Beltway Expansion and the lying-in-wait Loop (modified Hyperloop). Our Northeast Corridor is being assailed by the hard-hitting promotion of well-connected political machines and the promises being made by the developers of these disparate, uncoordinated projects, all claiming to bring significant traffic alleviation and ease of travel, a greener environment, and more prosperity for communities along the paths. The allure is understandable if taken at face value; however, as you well know regarding any complicated issue, there is much more under the surface. The issues roiling beneath the SCMaglev and other projects have not been mined sufficiently for concrete information about actual financial cost, the safety of new technologies, and the environmental impact affecting the lives of the residents and communities along the path. There are also grave concerns about social equity, health, and environmental justice.

Elected officials, if truly dedicated to public service and not under the thrall of powerful lobbyists, must reach out to their constituents and representative entities before making major decisions that will affect the communities along the path. Many questions have been asked and much input has been provided by elected officials and residents/communities/organizations in various formats over the past few years. One would anticipate that an official ombudsman would

review and help codify the extant data input as part of collecting a complete record. Going forward, one would expect that designating an appointed ombudsman would lead to the establishment of an important mechanism of data collection and resident assistance regarding the ongoing drama of the Purple Line, the post-EIS comment period for the Beltway Expansion project, and the current and post-comment period for the SCMaglev. Many troubling issues are associated with these projects. A consistent conduit who is held accountable for transmitting salient information, responding to concerns/inquiries, and maintaining records *accessible to the public* is vital.

The communities along the proposed paths comprise richly diverse, multiracial, multicultural, and multilingual residents. Elected officials, organizations, and residents are working to maintain, improve, and strengthen their municipalities and unincorporated areas, including in the area of sustainable transportation options.

I urge you to support House Bill 510. Establishing an ombudsman by statute as soon as possible would greatly assist the state in carefully vetting major transportation projects with all interested and affected parties in the state of Maryland.

Thank you for considering my input.

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