

Written Testimony from Susan R. McCutchen

In support (with amendment) of House Bill 510, An Act Concerning Transportation – Private Sector Transportation Projects Ombudsman – Establishment

February 2, 2021 (Environment and Transportation Committee Hearing)

I am submitting written testimony in support of House Bill 510, an act sponsored by Delegate Valentino-Smith, which I strongly support and applaud. The issues addressed therein are of grave concern to communities along the path of the proposed SCMaglev project, for which I support the No Build option. However, they are applicable to several major transportation projects already underway and being proposed in our Northeast Corridor.

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 designated ombudsman “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 a member of the Maryland Coalition for Responsible Transit (MCRT) and the Citizens Against the SCMaglev (CATS). 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.

House Bill 510 appropriately addresses the need for a designated ombudsman to “respond to concerns, complaints, and other inquiries” from local governing bodies and state residents, as well as other organizations. 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 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. For example, the MCRT and CATS join other environmental and grassroots organizations of many kinds that are actively engaged in addressing issues of environmental and social injustice as well as considering and proposing reasonable transportation alternatives that will enhance our lives. Municipal leaders are engaged in assessing the effect of current and proposed transportation projects as well. I urge you to reach out to the various sources of forward-looking transportation concepts and consider less intrusive and more cost-effective measures that can be taken.

As recurrent problems with extant and new Metro and other regional construction projects demonstrate, the DMV is a wetland marsh not conducive to the digging associated with intrusive construction projects that would entail disturbing the earth by exploratory boring under at various depths along most of and erupting from underneath in one section along the path, expanding the built environment on the surface at several locations along the path, and ultimately potentially harming or destroying private and public property. Further, consider the inevitable gentrification that will displace lower-income residents in Baltimore as continues to be the case in Washington, D.C.

Delegates, I urge you to support House Bill 510. Establishing an ombudsman 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 your consideration of my testimony.

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