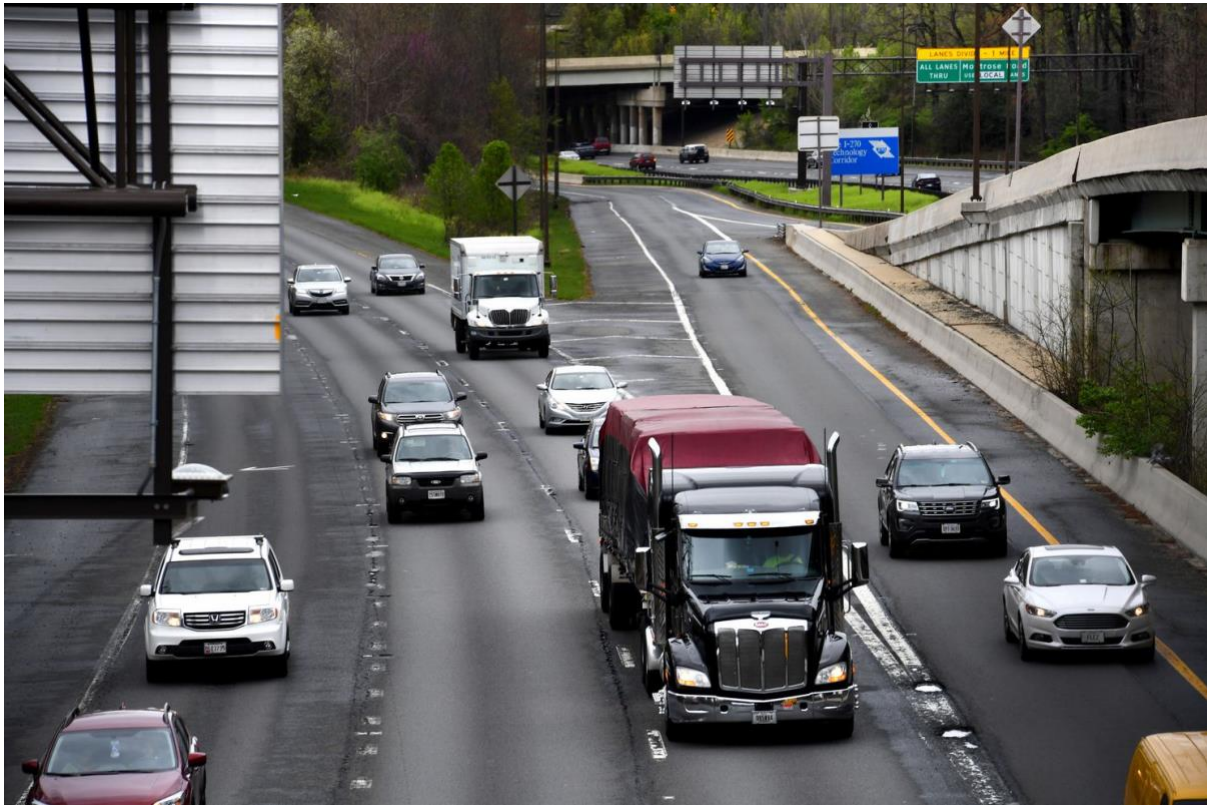


The #1 transit problem in Maryland is money



Traffic flows along interchanges that link Interstates 495 and 270 in 2018. (Katherine Frey/The Washington Post)

By Neil H. Harris
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Neil H. Harris is a member of the Gaithersburg City Council and a voting member of the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments Transportation Planning Board.

Transportation in Maryland is in dire need of an upgrade. But the ongoing politics and a battle between “transit people” and “roads people” is getting in the way of “just need to get there” people. What you’re not hearing is the reason nothing is moving.

There is no money.

The state and counties have little wiggle room in their budgets compared with the costs to improve transportation. There is almost

no capacity to borrow more; bonding ability is limited because additional borrowing would lower credit ratings and make borrowing costs unsustainable.

This explains why the currently proposed projects are focused on ways to bring private money to transportation projects. A [monorail project on Interstate 270](#) is being studied because it looks as though a private enterprise could build and operate it without public funding or significant environmental impact, paid for out of the farebox. [Highway widening](#) was structured as a public-private partnership because there is no available public money, so private companies were invited in to provide upfront funding and be repaid from toll revenue. The approach can be debated, but in today's environment, there is a lack of viable alternatives to fund projects.

There is no money.

If we want other, better types of transportation, we're going to need to follow Steve Jobs's advice and "think different."

The proven first step costs nothing, or nearly nothing: Remap our [bus routes](#). Transit ridership is [down 12 percent](#) since 2015. And that is true in our region and in most of the country. Two exceptions are [Houston](#) and [Seattle](#), where ridership is up. In those areas, bus routes were completely redrawn to reflect current transportation patterns, which are very different from when the routes were conceived. After a minimal period of disruption, while people adjusted to the new routes, ridership increased and travel time decreased.

Transportation is a leading cause of increased [carbon dioxide in the atmosphere](#). Rather than trying to completely change how transportation works, why don't we make transportation better? Incentives for zero-emission vehicles would continue the ongoing trend of reduction of vehicle emissions (thanks to better fuel efficiency) without requiring a radical change in human behavior. I hope my next car is electric, and so do most people I know. [Public policy](#) should make that selection easier through expanding rebates and high-occupancy-lane and toll preferences.

There is another big next step forward that would make a difference in Maryland: Copy the best practices from our neighbors in Northern Virginia by creating an independent regional transportation authority. The Northern Virginia Transportation Authority is responsible for regional congestion relief, running projects in the most congested part of the state. The authority receives about \$300 million annually that is 100 percent dedicated to moving people better, and over the past five years it has initiated billion of dollars in new transportation projects. The Virginia authority has designed a [smart system](#) that is effective at focusing tax money on programs that provide immediate and long-term benefits. This is new funding that cannot be used to cover existing expenses, and the state and local governments cannot reduce already existing funding. The authority spends most of the funding on regional projects in all modes — transit, pedestrian and bicycle, roads, etc. The remaining funds are given to the local jurisdictions for approved local projects.

Virginia has not solved transportation congestion yet, but it has initiated a large number of projects in a wide variety of transportation modes. Early data is already showing progress.

If we don't start, we can't get there.

Today, we are underinvesting in Maryland. We can adapt Virginia's transportation authority blueprint to fund congestion relief in Montgomery, Prince George's, Frederick and other counties where congestion and travel times are in crisis.

Today, there is no money.

Until there is money, all we will get is more arguing, politics, and congestion. Our leaders need to work together. We need to re-engineer our bus routes, reduce auto emissions and find fiscally sound ways to get Maryland moving. It's time to think different.