

THE



SUN

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baltimoresun.com

Friday, August 28, 2020

Gov. Hogan is right to invest in highways | COMMENTARY

By Carol Park

For The Baltimore Sun | Aug 28, 2020



At a bus stop outside of Medstar Harbor Hospital in March, a few people waited to take the bus to various destinations. (Ulysses Muñoz/The Baltimore Sun)

Expand congested highways or upgrade rundown subways? That question has been at the core of Maryland's transportation funding debates for decades.

Then came the COVID-19 pandemic and America's shift to [teleworking](#), which caused Maryland's mass transit [ridership to plummet](#). Meanwhile, the number of drivers also fell, but Maryland's interstate highways remained essential during the pandemic.

Since [2017](#), Gov. Larry Hogan has pushed to widen I-270 and I-495 in Maryland, the state's most congested highways, by way of a public-private partnership

"As we plan for Maryland recovery, these critical infrastructure projects are key to rebuilding our economy and keeping the supply chain moving," [Erin Henson](#), a spokeswoman for the Maryland Department of Transportation, recently told The Washington Post.

For one, highways are crucial arteries for trucking, allowing for smooth and reliable movement of goods during a crisis.

As currently envisioned by Governor Larry Hogan, private companies would design, build and maintain the four toll lanes along I-270 and I-495, [financing](#) their construction and keeping most of the toll revenue in the long run. Existing lanes, which would be rebuilt as well, will remain free to use.

In other words, the planned highway expansions will be self-financed by drivers who are willing to pay extra to avoid traffic, rather than by all taxpayers.

Therefore, the I-270 and I-495 expansions will improve Maryland's mobility without putting an excessive burden on

taxpayers, thereby fueling more business activities, job growth and economic expansion.

[A recent report](#) by the Road Information Project (TRIP) also notes that highway expansion and modernization are long overdue in Maryland. According to the report, Maryland's interstate highways are the second most congested in the U.S., only behind California. Since travel on state interstate highways increased nine times faster than the rate at which new lane capacity was added between 2000 to 2018, the report recommends "right-sizing" Maryland's interstate highways by adding additional lanes.

But unfortunately, public transit advocates want to kill Governor Hogan's plans so the state can focus on fixing mass transit, such as subways and buses.

While it is true that Maryland's subways and buses are in poor condition and need upgrades, transit advocates are wrong to blame Governor Hogan for underfunding mass transit. As Maryland's former Transportation Secretary [Pete Rahn](#) said in a statement responding to a letter from the business leaders urging for more MTA funding, "While transit only accounts for 8.5% of commuters, it takes up 42% of our budget."

Meanwhile, [only 3%](#) of Maryland's transportation revenue comes from transit.

Mr. Rahn [concluded](#), "Transit is becoming unsustainable within the [state transportation] trust fund and maintaining a highway system that 82% of Marylanders use," according to WTOP News.

Instead, the real fault lies with the Maryland Transit Administration's poor maintenance record and overall culture of neglect. Continuous [on-time performance](#) problems and frequent breakdowns of state subways have led to declining ridership and fare revenue over the years. As a result, Maryland's transit line fare revenues cover [only 20%](#) of its operating costs, compared to the U.S. average of 32%.

According to studies from the [University of Minnesota's Accessibility Observatory](#), Baltimore region residents can get to any job in the region in less than an hour by driving but can only reach about 11% of jobs within an hour using mass transit. Therefore, it is no wonder why transit [ridership is falling](#) in Maryland, especially for the metro and buses, and despite continuous government investment.

All in all, highways will continue to play a critical role as a backbone of Maryland's economy while mass transit stays largely irrelevant for the foreseeable future. To speed up economic recovery and boost post-crisis mobility, Maryland should not allow the pandemic to delay or halt its highway expansion plans.

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