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December 4, 2014

Office of the County Executive  
Executive Office Building (EOB)  
101 Monroe Street, 2nd Floor  
Rockville, Maryland 20850

Dear Mr. Leggett:

The Greater Olney Civic Association (GOCA) has reviewed your September 30 letter to Sen. Karen Montgomery regarding the status of Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) service in Olney. We were relieved to know that you do not support any plans to widen Georgia Avenue or impact businesses and homes in the Olney Town Center area. We were also pleased to see that you are open to exploring other express bus service options aside from the State Highway Administration's (SHA) May 14 BRT Design Alternatives, which the Olney Community overwhelmingly rejected in its September 15 letter to Mr. Gregory Slater at the SHA and Mr. Arthur Holmes at Montgomery County Department of Transportation (MCDOT). We believe you are correct when you state that "we should take a step back and reassess the long-term goals and objectives of the Olney/Wheaton BRT study."

Given your letter to Sen. Montgomery, we were quite surprised to later read a BRT Studies Project Update document – also dated September 30, 2014 – published by the SHA, the Maryland Transit Administration (MTA), and MCDOT. This document appears to be inconsistent with the new direction expressed in your letter to Sen. Montgomery, instead taking a business-as-usual approach with respect to BRT on Georgia Avenue to Olney. Page 8 of the document clearly states that the alternatives currently under study for Georgia Avenue are the same 5 Alternatives identified in the May 14 SHA pamphlet and overwhelmingly rejected by the Olney Community, with the exception of Alternative 1, the "no build" option. What happened to taking a step back and reassessing the goals of the project?

On the subject of project goals, page 7 of the document includes a checkbox next to a line item titled "establish a purpose and need," clearly indicating that, in addition to a purpose, a need for BRT in the Georgia Avenue corridor was formally established. If a document establishing the purpose and need for BRT up to Route 108 in Olney indeed exists, GOCA requests having the opportunity to review it. The path for our community to assess the soundest way forward to congestion relief on Georgia Avenue depends on our community knowing what the facts are and whether any assumptions are reasonable.

We agree with you that a reassessment of BRT in Olney is in order, therefore **we pointedly ask that you put an immediate and complete stop to any and all efforts to continue evaluating the SHA's May 14 BRT Design Alternatives.** Instead, we

encourage you and your staff to creatively explore other options for bringing express bus service to Olney. Our informal community survey report, which is attached for your reference, indicates that as many as 84% of Olney commuters drive alone to work, and it is clear to us that this contributes to congestion and creates an opportunity for an attractive, well-designed, and appropriately priced transit solution to succeed. **The alternative ideas presented below are intended to encourage creative thinking and motivate discussion; they should not be misconstrued as official GOCA positions.**

As taxpayers, we are highly skeptical of the current BRT strategy to spend untold millions of our tax dollars building an unwieldy, unworkable, over-engineered system on the basis of dubious ridership demand. This strikes us as a “build it and they will come” strategy that has little chance of succeeding. If the County wants to experiment with express bus service to see if the ridership actually exists, why not do it using the ICC? According to our informal community survey, 37% of Olney’s total population commutes to areas accessible from the Shady Grove Metro station. 31% do so by car, driving alone. Running a simple express bus service from Olney to Shady Grove Metro via the ICC would provide data on how many drivers would be willing to switch to using transit and what kind of impact that has on overall congestion. This alternative has the advantage of being easily implemented immediately; no need to spend millions designing and constructing dedicated busways, and no need to institute special tax districts (which GOCA strongly opposes) to fund design and construction costs. This alternative also has the advantage of moving more commuters over the under-utilized ICC. Isn’t that why we spent billions building the ICC?

Shifting away from the current emphasis on designing and building a Georgia Avenue busway toward using the ICC for an express bus service frees up time and resources to focus on creating a first-class service model for the express bus. There is a reason why commuters prefer driving over using the bus today: current bus service is neither pleasant nor reliable for the commuter. To have a shot at motivating commuters to stop driving and switch to riding the express bus, you would need to at a minimum provide some or all of the following:

- **Free parking.** One of the many flaws of the current BRT plan is there is no parking strategy. If you want to get commuters out of their cars, they have to have somewhere to put them. Consider a distributed park-and-ride strategy throughout Olney as described in the 2005 Master Plan. Lots could be located at spots such as MGH, Longwood, Town Center, ICC, and other areas throughout the community. By making parking free, commuters will immediately see an opportunity for major cost savings because their alternative is to pay to park at Shady Grove Metro or their final destination.
- **Point to point service.** Commuters do not want the Super Shuttle model. Once they board the express bus at the park-and-ride, the next stop should be Shady Grove Metro via ICC.
- **Free wifi and ample power receptacles.** Help commuters turn their daily commute into productive time by positioning the express bus as a mobile office. Provide high-speed wifi service so they can be connected and productive during the entire ride. Provide power for each passenger to recharge mobile devices.

- **Rest area concept with wifi and power stations at Shady Grove Metro.** One of the biggest downsides to public transportation is the complete lack of comfort stations during the entire commute. Build an interstate highway class rest area at Shady Grove Metro so when express bus riders transfer to and from Metro, they can grab a snack, stay connected, recharge mobile devices, and use a clean restroom in an environmentally controlled secure environment. Allow vendors such as Starbucks and Panera to provide services. Charge them for the privilege and use funds collected there to offset costs of operating the express bus service, thereby lowering the fares paid by commuters.
- **Reliable scheduled service.** If the schedule says the express bus leaves at 6:50AM, then make sure the bus leaves at 6:50AM. Simple as that. A key reason why standard bus service is not attractive is riders have no idea how long they will have to wait for the bus to arrive.
- **Extended operating hours.** If commuters have uncertainty about whether or not the express bus will still be running by the time their Metro train gets to Shady Grove, they will choose to drive. You have to run the express bus for extended hours so commuters have confidence they will have safe, reliable transportation back to their cars at the park-and-ride lot.
- **Auto insurance discount for transit users.** If a commuter is not driving to work, his insurance risk goes down. The commuter should be able to recoup that lowered risk profile in the form of reduced insurance premiums. Lowering auto insurance costs for commuters who use transit will create an economic incentive for commuters to choose transit over driving.
- **Mixed use trails connecting park-and-ride stations to neighborhoods.** Give people in surrounding neighborhoods the option of walking or bicycling to the park-and-ride lot.
- **Secure storage for bicycles.** If they do bike to the park-and-ride, they need a secure locker to store their bicycle in.
- **Offboard fare collection using Metro SmarTrip Card.** For convenience, make fare collection for the express bus just like Metro. Doing that will make fare collection one less barrier to adoption.

An express bus service designed along these lines would have a chance of attracting the ridership necessary to become financially self-sustaining. Only after you prove that you can deliver and operate a successful and popular service of this caliber should you consider expanding it by building dedicated busways.

We are aware that the County's Rapid Transit System Project team is in the final stages of selecting the Corridor Advisory Committee (CAC) members for the Georgia Avenue corridor. Our hope is that once

the CAC is seated, they are allowed the freedom to bring forward creative new alternatives, such as the ideas presented above, and not artificially constrained by the SHA's May 14 BRT Design Alternatives.

Respectfully,

John Webster  
President

Cc: Montgomery County Council  
District 14 and District 19 Delegates and Senators  
Mr. Arthur Holmes – Director, MCDOT  
Mr. Gregory Slater – Director, Office of Planning and Preliminary Engineering, SHA  
Governor-elect Larry Hogan

Attachment