

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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**Proposed \$4 Billion I-270 Expansion at Odds with
Montgomery County's Smart Growth and Climate Goals**

The Montgomery County Planning Board recently recommended that taxpayers spend \$4 billion on widening I-270 while it voted to deny public funding to a \$70 million plan to rebuild Rockville Pike near White Flint Mall that would turn the highway into a pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly boulevard with center bus lanes, and would support a compact, sustainable redevelopment plan.

"We urge the County Council to reject the Planning Board's misguided transportation recommendations, the result of which would be more cars on the highways and more traffic jams," said Ben Ross, President of Action Committee for Transit, a Montgomery County citizens group. "The council should ask the State to evaluate some of the many possible transportation improvements for the corridor that don't involve more highway lanes. We cannot pave our way out of traffic congestion."

Dolores Milmo, Conservation Associate for the Audubon Naturalist Society, agrees. "Rather than waste \$4 billion widening I-270," said Milmo, "the county should invest in light rail from Shady Grove to Kentlands; a fast, direct rail connection from Shady Grove to Germantown and Clarksburg; and

all-day, two-way MARC service from Union Station to Frederick and Harper's Ferry." (The latter is already in the state's plans, but remains unfunded.)

The groups, joined by other transportation activists in our area also prefer that part of the money go toward rebuilding Route 355.

"We support turning Rockville Pike into a walkable urban boulevard, beginning in the White Flint area and stretching to Rockville and Gaithersburg," said Ross. "The people-first approach that has been designed for White Flint would serve as a model to improve accessibility along the rest of Route 355 in the future."

"At what point in our history would the widening ever stop?" asked Cheryl Cort, Policy Director of the Coalition for Smarter Growth, about the Planning Board's I-270 recommendation. "Meeting the county and state smart growth goals, and reducing traffic, energy use and climate emissions, demands a very different and comprehensive approach -- making transit and walkable streets the top priority."

"We urge the County Council to reject the Planning Board's misguided transportation recommendations and to ask the County and State to instead evaluate and adopt a comprehensive set of transportation and land use solutions for the corridor that don't involve never-ending highway widening," said Milmo. "We want the Council to make a statement against lanes as the solution to the corridor's needs and to adopt transportation solutions in keeping with their expressed commitments to fight climate change, reduce energy use, and implement smarter growth."

The groups also endorsed the Sierra Club's recent letter to the Montgomery County Council, reproduced below. The letter provides additional detail as to why all of the groups request a more comprehensive examination of alternatives.

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Sierra Club – Montgomery County Group -- Letter to the Council:

July 19, 2009

Dear Councilmember ,

Re: Montgomery County Sierra Club Statement on I-270 / Corridor Cities Transitway (CCT) Project Planning Study

The plans for widening I-270 reflect a business-as-usual philosophy, a throw-back to a 1950s “roads first” approach rather than a forward-looking one that emphasizes transit and smart growth. We know now that increasing road capacity inevitably leads to greater car use, and then to car-centric residential and commercial construction alongside the new capacity.

We do recognize that I-270 is congested as far out as Frederick, including traffic caused by diffuse employment centers in Montgomery County. But road widening is not the way to solve it and ***the options the Council is being asked to choose among represent a false choice***. Right now you can either choose the straw-man “no-build” option or select one of the remaining options that differ from each other largely in how many new lanes of highway are built and whether any of the lanes will charge dynamic tolls or not. The impact on I-270 congestion of making improvements to public transportation is limited to looking at the Corridor Cities Transitway. The possibility that more extensive and robust additions to the County’s public transit system (over and above the CCT) might be as effective at reducing traffic congestion on I-270 as adding more lanes is not even considered.

The consequences of reaching a wrong decision within the confines of a false choice are serious. The financial cost of any of the alternatives is in the billions of dollars. Just as important are the environmental costs of choosing an alternative that will add several additional lanes of traffic traveling the length of the county.

In order to escape the confines of the false choice now before you, it is necessary to create and then analyze the impact on congestion of a ***comprehensive transit alternative*** serving the Corridor Cities and Frederick County. Such an alternative may cost less than widening I-270. A comprehensive transit solution would have a smaller environmental impact. It would support concentrated development at transit stations instead of promoting car-dependent, low-density development. It has the potential to help Montgomery County achieve the 80 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions called for in county legislation passed in 2008—something that having additional lanes of traffic on I-270 will never do.

We ask that you not select a Locally Preferred Alternative at the July 21st County Council meeting. Instead we request you postpone selecting a Locally Preferred Alternative until a comprehensive transit option is developed and its impact on projected congestion on I-270 is fully analyzed and compared to I-270 widening alternatives.

This is an opportunity for Montgomery County and Maryland to move away from the unsustainable approach of always responding to congestion by building more lanes of highway. At a time when destructive climate change seems increasingly likely in the not-so-distant future and rising oil prices affect our economic welfare today, we truly are at a fork in the road.

Sincerely,

David Hauck
Chair
Sierra Club, Montgomery County Group

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