

MD 355 BRT

Draft Public Involvement Plan

September 2017

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1. Project Overview and Purpose of the Public Involvement Plan

1.1 Maryland 355 BRT Project Overview

The Montgomery County Department of Transportation (MCDOT) is planning the implementation of bus rapid transit (BRT) on Maryland Route 355 (MD 355). This project is part of the implementation of the Countywide Transit Corridors Functional Master Plan (CTCFMP).¹ The MD 355 BRT corridor spans approximately 22 miles from Clarksburg to Bethesda. Most of its alignment will be along MD 355 (Frederick Road, Frederick Avenue, Hungerford Road, Rockville Pike, and Wisconsin Ave); a few departures from MD 355, such as along Observation Drive, are under consideration for northern portions of the BRT. MD 355 is an activity center corridor planned for a high level of development.

The MD 355 corridor spans multiple jurisdictions and Master and Sector Plans. The character and surrounding land uses of MD 355 vary significantly throughout the corridor. The corridor setting is generally urbanized from Bethesda to Gaithersburg, and more rural from Gaithersburg towards Clarksburg, where residential development has occurred in various scattered locations. The land use in the north has a mixture of single family, townhouse, and multi-family residential development, as well as commercial development, though residential areas are generally separated from other land uses by main roads. The densities increase and land uses become more mixed as the corridor traverses more urbanized settings, such as Bethesda, White Flint, and Rockville, where Montgomery County has planned for additional walkable and transit-oriented development in the future. The MD 355 roadway is generally six lanes wide² from Bethesda to Middlebrook Road in Germantown; farther north, it narrows to four lanes. MD 355 narrows again to two lanes about one-half mile north of the intersection of MD 355 with MD 27 (Ridge Road).

1.2 Project Background and History

The Maryland Department of Transportation (MDOT), in partnership with MCDOT, led the development of the Draft Preliminary Purpose and Need Statement for the MD 355 BRT,³ published in December 2015 and updated in April 2016, which provides key background information regarding the corridor. MDOT also led development of the subsequent Conceptual Alternatives Report, which was published in April 2017. In May 2017, MDOT transitioned the MD 355 BRT project to MCDOT. MCDOT will now lead planning, engineering, and implementation of the project.

The Draft Preliminary Purpose and Need Statement for MD 355 BRT notes that the County first proposed BRT as the most appropriate mode for improving transit in the corridor in its 1993 Strategic Transit Plan. In 2011, MCDOT completed a Countywide Bus Rapid Transit Study, which provided an initial look at the possibility of BRT along several main county transportation routes, including MD 355. The study was a proactive effort to explore transit improvements that could address the existing travel demand and

¹ Montgomery County, Countywide Transit Corridors Functional Master Plan: Amendment to the Master Plan of Highways, <http://montgomeryplanning.org/transportation/highways/brt.shtm>.

² Additional left turn lanes are often present as well.

³ MD 355 BRT, Draft Preliminary Purpose and Need Statement, <https://mta.maryland.gov/sites/default/files/MD%20355%20BRT%20DRAFT%20Preliminary%20Purpose%20and%20Need%20-%20April%202016.pdf>.

anticipated growth in vehicle trips in Montgomery County. The study provided an overview of multiple corridors, of associated existing and future transit demand, and of potential improvement recommendations for each.

Acting upon the findings from the 2011 document, Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC) developed the Countywide Transit Corridors Functional Master Plan. This Functional Master Plan was approved and adopted by the Montgomery County Council in December 2013. The Plan proposes the development of a BRT network throughout the County to support the County's mobility, land use, and economic development goals. To ensure network integrity and achieve the County's vision, it recommends and provides the basis for the rights-of-way reservations required to accommodate enhanced transit improvements (i.e., bus lanes, stations, roadway widening, etc.) in individual transit corridors. One of several corridors included in the Master Plan is MD 355 from Bethesda to Clarksburg, with the potential for two routes to connect the MD 355 BRT to the Corridor Cities Transitway.⁴ The Master Plan recommends "dedicated BRT lane(s)" for the portion of MD 355 from Bethesda to MD 27 in Clarksburg.

BRT has long been considered the most appropriate option for the corridor because it can be implemented more easily and quickly than light rail at a lower capital cost. BRT typically combines features such as dedicated running ways, specialized buses, upgraded stations, and automated information systems into an integrated system with a unique brand identity. BRT stations are spaced further apart than local bus stops and often include a combination of enhanced passenger shelters, level boarding platforms, real-time passenger information systems, and off-board fare collection. BRT vehicles are specialized articulated buses with low floors, multiple doors to enable quick boarding and alighting, higher capacity, increased passenger circulation, bicycle provisions, and brand identity.

Two Corridor Advisory Committees (CACs) for the MD 355 BRT corridor – MD 355 North and MD 355 South – were established in 2015 to make recommendations to the County on the design, construction and proposed station locations for the corridor.⁵ The CACs are a key component of the County's public and stakeholder involvement effort, as they: allow residents to discuss and provide input related to planning and design; enhance transparency and community involvement; provide a venue for interaction and information-sharing among those directly impacted; inform the study of community impacts to encourage community-sensitive implementation and minimize negative impacts; serve as a clearinghouse for sharing timely and accurate information; and provide leadership and build consensus in the community to coalesce diverse interests.

1.3 Purpose of the Public Involvement Plan

This Public Involvement Plan (PIP) outlines public involvement activities that will take place at different points during this phase of the project, which will run from June 2017 to December 2018. The purpose of

⁴ The two additional routes would run along (1) Shakespeare Boulevard and (2) Seneca Meadows Parkway, Goldenrod Lane, Observation Drive, and Middlebrook Road.

⁵ The CTCFMP and guidance from the County Council called for the establishment of the CACs.

the PIP is to ensure achievement of the following public involvement goals for the MD 355 BRT project is met:

1. Educate the public and stakeholders regarding the project objectives, need for the project, and key BRT concepts.
2. Engage with stakeholders and the public to gather meaningful feedback that will be incorporated into the planning and engineering process.
3. Ensure public involvement activities are accessible to, and accommodate, people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, nationalities, income levels, disability statuses, and levels of English proficiency.
4. Meet the CTCFMP's requirements for a robust public involvement process in advance of a public hearing on the project.

The project team will use a wide variety of public engagement tactics to reach diverse audiences within the MD 355 corridor to accomplish these goals. The outreach efforts build on the "Get On Board BRT" outreach program launched by Montgomery County in the fall of 2016, with the goal of establishing deeper knowledge of the MD 355 BRT by creating project-specific information and materials. Expanded community programming will integrate the public into the project's outreach process.

Many County residents are still unfamiliar with the concept of BRT, although the idea of a premium, limited stop service has been positively received by riders, workers, and residents along the corridor. Outreach events targeting the public will focus on educating people regarding BRT in general, as well as the MD 355 BRT project, and will include various opportunities and methods for providing feedback. Topics will include the distinction between local bus and BRT, the nature of the MD 355 alignment, and passenger amenities. During this period, the County will review analysis results and input received to identify a recommended alternative for the MD 355 BRT and examine related elements including local bus service planning and access opportunities.

This PIP and a CAC Program Plan (described in more detail below) outline how the public, stakeholders, and CACs will continue to stay engaged with the process.

Given the importance of reaching people of all levels of English proficiency, the project team will work with MCDOT to identify when it will be necessary or beneficial to produce materials in, or provide at events interpreters proficient in additional languages to accommodate the anticipated participants.

2. Branding and Relationship to the Broader BRT Program

In addition to the MD 355 corridor, MCDOT currently has plans to implement BRT along ten different corridors, and is currently studying implementation of BRT on the US 29 and Veirs Mill Road (MD 586) corridors. All BRT routes will be part of the "Flash" BRT system.⁶ The US 29 BRT will be the first route

⁶ MCDOT conducted a two-month contest between November 2016 and January 2017 in which residents had the opportunity to choose from three suggested system names or propose their own. "Flash" received the most votes.

implemented; it is expected to be completed in 2020. All three corridors on which study has begun are part of the Get On Board BRT campaign, which has its own website (GetOnBoardBRT.com) where people can find information about how BRT works. The website also has options for people to provide feedback regarding BRT, request a meeting or focus group in their neighborhoods, and sign up to receive news and updates.

Some members of the public may be familiar with the US 29 BRT project, which is currently an implementation-focused effort. Therefore, in explaining the MD 355 BRT project to residents, it may be important to note that this phase of the MD 355 BRT is an alternatives analysis (AA), which involves identifying the best alignment option for the route, rather than an implementation project.

Public involvement for the MD 355 BRT project will build on the lessons learned from the US 29 public involvement activities.

3. Data Collection

Having accurate and relevant data about contacts and stakeholders, as well as about local opinions, perceptions, and concerns, is a cornerstone component of conducting effective public and stakeholder engagement. By capturing key contact data, it will:

- Ensure people who are affected by and interested in the project have an opportunity to participate in the process and have their opinions heard.
- Create opportunities to follow up with contacts to provide updates.
- Allow the project team to explain to those with whom it has engaged, as well as to decision makers, how feedback was incorporated into the process.

Given the long-term nature of the project, public engagement will continue for several years until the project is fully implemented, so it is especially important to have data to allow consistent and effective long-term engagement.

To collect data to support the public engagement process, the project team will develop community and employer outreach databases, conduct focus groups, and conduct a survey to gather information about opinions and concerns.

3.1 Employer and Community Outreach Databases

The project team will use existing resources and conduct research to create an employer outreach database to capture employers located on the MD 355 corridor. The employer database will track which employers have engaged with the project (and the points of contact at each organization) and which have been identified through research. The team will also maintain a community outreach database, which will have contact information for individuals, community-based organizations, and developers that have shared their contact information with the project team at events or by email, or have signed up to receive updates on the Get On Board BRT website. These databases will support outreach conducted to promote focus groups through a variety of media (e-blast, phone calls, direct site engagement) to ensure a diverse set of participants at each meeting.

3.2 Focus Groups

The project team will hold focus groups in partnership with employers or other groups of organizations or residents (e.g. developers, transit riders) served by the MD 355 BRT project. Participating employers may include, but are not limited to: The National Institutes of Health, Naval Support Activity Bethesda (includes Walter Reed Medical Center), Marriott International, Lockheed Martin, Adventist HealthCare, Montgomery College, US Nuclear Regulatory Commission, GEICO, Booz Allen Hamilton, Hughes, LM Operations Support, Clark Construction, Donohoe, JBG Smith, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The employer outreach database will be a key tool for gathering and organizing information about employers' participation in focus groups. Focus groups could take various formats; there could be focus groups held in coordination with a single employer that selects 10-20 employees to participate. Alternatively, focus groups could include representatives from multiple different employers, organizations (such as chambers of commerce, including African American, Asian American, and Hispanic chambers), or experiences (e.g. frequent transit users). In the case of focus groups with participation of individuals representing their employers or organizations, focus group participants may represent both their individual perspectives as well as those of their companies' or organizations' employees and leadership.

The project team will create the focus group content and a digital voting activity to capture feedback in real time. This effort will provide additional inputs into the MD 355 service planning effort and station design.

Employers will be invited to complete virtual signups on the [BRT website](#)⁷ to request a focus group. A follow-up survey will be sent to all identified participants to gather initial information about topics of interest and poll them to identify which dates, times, and locations would be ideal for a focus group. Focus groups typically have a maximum of 20 participants to allow for effective interaction. Focus groups may offer food and/or giveaways as an incentive for participation of employers and employees.

3.3 Survey

The project team will create a survey to better understand the needs of residents, employees, and visitors that will or could utilize the MD 355 BRT service. The survey will be distributed at various events described in Section 4 below, such as pop-up events. This survey, which will build on questions used in previous related efforts, will ask questions regarding respondents' current commutes, such as which public transportation services they use and how often they use public transit. The survey will ask about demographic information such as ethnic background, household income, level of education, language preference and level of English proficiency; zip codes for where they work and live; preferred ways of sharing and getting information from MCDOT; community groups they belong to or represent; and solicit any other general comments. Additional details could be added, in consultation with MCDOT and the project team, regarding general knowledge and opinions of BRT and trade-offs regarding potential station design options.

⁷ See: <http://getonboardbrt.com/meeting-request-form/>.

The survey will help MCDOT and the project team understand: public sentiment on various BRT-related issues; how responses and opinions vary by different income levels, racial groups, etc.; and whether there are any concerns shared by numerous respondents, such as related to impacts to local bus service. As needed, the survey can be tailored to address specific questions (e.g. regarding particular segments) that arise throughout the process. The project team will take findings regarding public sentiment and specific concerns into account in crafting agendas and facilitation plans for activities described in this Plan.

3.4 Comment Database

The project team will be responsible for collecting comments received from the public and stakeholders throughout the project. As needed to complete deliverables, or upon request from MCDOT, the project team can synthesize and analyze the comments to provide MCDOT with a summary of how the public responded to survey questions, focus group questions, etc. Content syntheses and analyses will be incorporated into the Public Feedback Analysis and Final Report (see Section 6.1).

4. Public and Stakeholder Engagement

4.1 Partner Agency Meetings

The project team will facilitate or support meetings with MDOT, the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, the M-NCPPC, and the Cities of Gaithersburg and Rockville. Partner agency meetings will be held at least every two to three months throughout the project period. This will promote clear lines of communication and cooperation between MCDOT and these partners, who will each have important roles in the implementation of the MD 355 BRT.

4.2 Community Leader Meetings

The project team will facilitate or support – including through the development of presentation materials or other products or efforts – meetings with community leaders to update them regarding the project status and progress and to prepare them to answer questions they are likely to receive. Recognizing that community leaders often serve as a first line of response to the public, it is important that they are aware of what is happening with the project so that they are well positioned to update their communities, respond to questions, and, when necessary, clear up any confusion or misinformation that could arise. Meetings with community leaders could also be arranged to discuss issues of interest to them or to identify and pursue opportunities for collaboration and partnership.

4.3 Corridor Advisory Committees

As noted earlier, since 2015, the two Corridor Advisory Committees (CACs) for the MD 355 BRT project have met regularly with the BRT project teams to review information and provide feedback. The CACs comprise key stakeholders and play a vital role in ensuring that local voices are represented in the planning and design of the BRT project. The CACs are advisory rather than decision-making groups. Feedback received from CAC members, as well as the concerns and needs expressed by all local communities along the MD 355 corridor, are seriously considered in developing recommendations. CAC members also play an important role in working with the project team to conduct outreach to engage the broader community when community updates and open houses are scheduled.

The Rockville Metro station is the current dividing point between the MD 355 North CAC and the MD 355 South CAC. MCDOT and the project team will discuss with members of the MD 355 South CAC at the fall

2017 meeting whether their CAC should be divided into two smaller CACs. The CACs will continue to meet throughout this next phase of the project, with the specific intervals between meetings to be dictated by the progress that has been made in terms of studying the alternatives and identification of junctions at which CAC members' feedback is particularly critical. The project team and MCDOT anticipate that CAC meetings will be held approximately every four months.

The CAC Program Plan provides detailed information about the topics expected to be covered at each CAC meeting. Prior to each CAC meeting, when appropriate, the project team will develop informational packets and recommended exercises to be sent to the CAC members in advance of meetings. Given the desire to keep the CAC meetings to between two and two and a half hours in length, this will, when necessary, help ensure everyone participating in the meetings has been brought up to speed so that the discussion can focus on key questions and points of discussion or clarification that are most relevant to the all CAC members and project team. Meeting presentation slides will not be distributed to CAC members prior to meetings, as the ability to update presentation materials in the days or hours prior to the meeting will help ensure they are based on the latest available information. Presentation slides will be posted to the website following each meeting.

The number of components and the level of complexity of this study may require additional engagement activities with CAC members and the communities they represent, which are discussed in more detail below. CAC members will be informed of available options for engaging with the project team outside of the CAC meetings, such as the community updates. The project team will work with CAC members to schedule updates, as determined by MCDOT to be needed and appropriate, to discuss specific topics or issues. Opportunities to participate in these updates will be extended to other residents and stakeholders as well. The project team will work collaboratively with the requesting party to structure the meetings in a way that is most appropriate for the discussion topic or level of familiarity with the project. Separate meetings may be valuable for discussing impacts to specific neighborhoods, intersections, local bus routes, etc. The opportunity to have these engagements will not only help to address specific issues and ensure residents have ample opportunities for their opinions to be heard; it will also help keep the CAC meetings focused on the agenda items at hand, given the volume of material to be covered at each meeting.

4.4 Additional Targeted Engagement with Residents

The opportunity to communicate with the project team, as determined to be necessary and appropriate by MCDOT, will also be extended to residents. In addition to providing residents various opportunities to engage with the team through the events described below (community updates, pop-up events), the team will work with residents as needed to discuss specific topics or issues. The project team will work with the requesting party and MCDOT to structure the correspondence, call, or meeting in a way that is most appropriate for the topic at and the audience (for example, translations or interpreters may need to be provided). These separate meetings will be particularly valuable for discussing potential impacts to specific neighborhoods, intersections, apartment complexes, local bus routes, etc. The opportunity to have these separate engagements will help to ensure residents have ample opportunities for their opinions to be heard.

4.5 Community Updates

To support outreach efforts and engage new audiences, project team members will conduct community updates through scheduled community events and meetings. These updates are held in coordination with local citizen groups such as homeowners' and citizens' associations, employers, civic associations, community advocacy groups, rotary clubs, and chambers of commerce (including ethnic chambers of commerce). This outreach is designed to target diverse audiences, including current riders, transit-dependent populations, minority populations, senior citizens, persons with disabilities, low-income communities, and environmental advocacy or other interest groups. Community updates are designed to be 10-15 minute informational presentations to provide a basic overview of the project and encourage increased participation in BRT events and visits to the Get On Board BRT website. Updates may also provide an opportunity for project team members to identify potential concerns that warrant follow-up. Community members can request community updates by online through the project website, by contacting the project team through a CAC meeting, or by directly contacting any project team member, including MCDOT staff.

As needed, community updates can also be held separately from scheduled events and meetings to accommodate requests for presentation of information and discussion. Such community update meetings will be open to all members of the public, and CAC members and community organizations may be requested to assist in enhancing awareness among residents about upcoming meetings. Meetings may involve presentations and other interactive components; the agenda items and activities will depend on the size of the meeting, anticipated audience, known topics of interest, and other factors. Issue area topics may include, but are not limited to, operations planning, service planning, multi-modal access including bicycles and pedestrians, or station design.

The project team will recruit experts to present at community updates and will also provide at least one facilitator and one staff person to take minutes. In-depth discussions and comments received will inform the project direction, design, and policy decisions. The project team will coordinate, facilitate, and document the updates or meeting within four weeks of the requests.

4.6 Open Houses

Two public open houses regarding the MD 355 BRT project were held in the Spring (April and May) of 2016 and another two were held in February 2017.⁸ All open house locations were accessible by transit. At the Spring 2016 open houses, the Draft Preliminary Purpose and Need Statement was presented to participants and discussed. At the February 2017 open houses, the project team for that phase of the project presented information about the analysis of alternatives, station design considerations, and next steps toward implementation of MD 355 BRT.

MCDOT and the project team anticipate holding a series of open houses in the summer of 2018 to present information about the process and available preliminary findings for service planning, engineering, station design, and analysis of the alternatives. The number and location of open houses to be held during this

⁸ For more information about past open houses, see:
<https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/BRT/md355project.html>.

phase of the project will be determined in consultation with MCDOT. The team anticipates the open houses will have two major components:

- Open house- and workshop-style interactive activities, both at the beginning and end of the scheduled meeting time, during which participants can learn about the project through informational boards describing the MD 355 BRT project process as well as the broader Get On Board BRT campaign. There may also be an activity in which participants can provide comments on service needs that will be considered in making adjustments to the service planning recommendations. Participants will also be invited to provide feedback regarding the process, best contact methods, and sentiments toward the project that will be used in the fall of 2018 to inform an update to this PIP.
- A presentation explaining the study, process, updated alternative visualization and analysis, and next steps.

The open houses will be coordinated with the CAC members, who may provide input on activities and be asked to assist with disseminating information about them within their respective communities. All open house events will be held in transit-accessible locations and the project team will work with MCDOT to ensure those limited English proficiency or disabilities are accommodated. Key organizations with whom the project team and MCDOT will coordinate to schedule and promote open houses may include homeowners' and citizens' associations, public agency partners (e.g., libraries, schools, etc.), and community-based organizations such as Casa de Maryland. The community outreach database, which will capture all civic groups that have engaged with the outreach efforts, will be maintained (as discussed above) and consulted for these purposes. The project team will work with MCDOT to identify when and where community meetings are needed and publicize community meetings through a variety of media (e.g., e-blast, mailers, phone calls, social media, direct site engagement, etc.) to ensure a diverse set of participants. The project team will create open house content and, if appropriate, digital voting or other activities to capture feedback in real time. A project team member will take minutes of all group discussions at these events. The minutes and feedback will be shared with the CACs.

4.7 Pop-up Events

The project team will host "pop-up" events throughout the County to continue the BRT education program, "Get On Board BRT." They will include material regarding the MD 355 BRT project. Pop-ups can be held at planned events such as festivals, as well as at transit, shopping, and employment centers along the project corridor. These events will be designed to disseminate educational materials regarding the future of the MD 355 BRT project, the station design effort, and project timeline. Get On Board BRT giveaways may be used as incentives for public participation, and the digital and print survey will be utilized to obtain public feedback.

The project team will provide tabling at community events. Upcoming outreach opportunities include (but are not limited to): shopping centers, town centers, farmers' markets, Metro or bus stations, theaters and cinemas, Montgomery County Parks events, festivals or neighborhood events, schools, civic group meetings, residential communities, religious institutions, recreation centers, and municipal swimming pools.

Pop-up events will take place as part of the Get On Board BRT outreach and education efforts throughout the project schedule to educate the public about the overall BRT program in the County.

5. Written and Virtual Communications

Updates to the BRT and Get On Board BRT website and social media platforms will be made at key points in the project schedule.

5.1 Written Outreach

The project team, in coordination with MCDOT, will develop descriptions of project updates that can be included in other community newsletters (municipal, county, state, elected officials' newsletters). As deemed necessary, the project team will develop flyers and mailers that can be distributed to inform individuals and employers about the project, upcoming opportunities to engage with the project team, and opportunities to request community updates.

5.2 Online Outreach – Website Updates and Social Media Postings

The project team will continue to maintain all online promotion and outreach through the Get On Board BRT website and social media platforms (i.e., Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube). Open houses will be promoted through contact with local organizations, community boards/meetings, community listservs, on social media, the County's website and email listserv, advertisements in online and print media, and through civic associations. Open house materials will be available to the public on the Get On Board BRT website. The digital survey designed for upcoming outreach efforts will be embedded into the project website and promoted through social media. In addition, all events and programs will be posted to the project website's calendar and promoted through real time social media engagement.

6. Reporting

6.1 Public Feedback Analysis and Final Report

The project team will collect feedback from the public through a variety of media, including print feedback forms, digital survey tools, online comments, and interactive activities. All handwritten comment forms, notes and feedback recorded during events or other engagements will be entered into the public involvement comment database. At the end of the preliminary design phase, in the Fall of 2018, the project team will develop an outreach report that will include a summary of activities, findings, and outcomes from CAC meetings, focus groups, community updates, pop-up events, open houses, survey responses, and online engagement.