

# **Fighting to save MARC's late trains**

## **Commuter, council members appeal for the 10:05**

By Michael Dresser, Baltimore Sun, December 11, 2008

Veteran federal worker Rolf Schmitt does not regularly take the 10:05 p.m. MARC Penn Line train out of Washington. Usually, he is back at his Bolton Hill home much earlier.

But every so often, his job at the U.S. Department of Transportation keeps him at the office late into the evening. It is then that he depends on that train, which the Maryland Transit Administration is proposing to discontinue as of Jan. 12 as a cost-cutting measure.

Schmitt recently made an appeal to Baltimore City Councilman William H. Cole IV, who prompted eight colleagues on the 15-member council to join him in a letter asking Gov. Martin O'Malley to spare the train. They contend that a late train is critical if Baltimore is to attract residents who work in Washington, including members of the incoming Obama administration.

"It makes us a little less attractive for those people we're trying to attract," Cole said.

The 10:05 p.m. train is one of two MARC departures from Washington that the MTA proposes to eliminate as Maryland transportation officials struggle to cope with a severe revenue shortfall that has depleted the state's Transportation Trust Fund. The other train leaves at 11 p.m. As part of an effort to cut its budget by \$26 million, the MTA also is proposing to eliminate or pare some commuter bus lines and to reduce MARC services during holidays.

According to MTA spokeswoman Cheron Wicker, the decision to eliminate the late MARC trains is not final. She noted that the agency will be accepting public comments on proposed cutbacks until Dec. 26. The MTA already backed off one of its proposals when it decided not to cut commuter bus service between Columbia and Baltimore as much as originally planned.

The nine City Council members told O'Malley that they are not concerned about the proposed elimination of the 11 p.m. train that his administration had added to the MARC schedule only recently. But they contend that the 10:05 p.m. train to Penn Station is one that Baltimore commuters such as Schmitt have come to depend on for those nights when work - whether at government agencies or high-powered law firms - won't let go.

Schmitt, 58, said he has been using the late train on and off for years. "I'm grateful it's there," he said. "There are occasional nights you have to work late."

Without the 10:05 departure, the last train of the evening would leave Union Station at 8:40 p.m. - a time that could rule out, among other things, many after-work dinners in Washington.

The MTA contends that the late Penn Line trains were proposed for elimination because they are not as heavily used as earlier runs. Schmitt agrees, but he says the later train seems to attract a respectable level of ridership. He is suggesting that MARC drop an earlier run and spread out departures while keeping the late train.

Without the late train, Schmitt said, he would be forced to drive to Washington on days that his work might keep him late. He said that taking a late Amtrak train would cost \$20 and that Greyhound service no longer takes passengers into the central business district.

Cole expressed concern that the lack of a late train would discourage people who work in Washington from living in Baltimore.

In their letter, the council members point out that the proposed service elimination comes at a critical time - just as a new administration is about to take over in Washington.

"Eliminating evening service will discourage incoming officials of the administration from considering Baltimore as they purchase homes," the council members say. "D.C. commuters have made a significant contribution to Baltimore's tax base, as will future commuters if they have adequate public transportation available to them."

Kirby Fowler, president of the Downtown Partnership, said his organization and board members have also weighed in with O'Malley in opposing the cuts. He noted that under the MTA proposal, the 8:40 p.m. and 9:30 p.m. departures from Penn Station to Washington would also be eliminated.

"I believe it sends the wrong message to have the last train out of Baltimore to be the 7:25 train," he said. Among other things, Fowler said, such a schedule would make it difficult for Washingtonians who work in Baltimore to stay after work to go to the city's restaurants.

"There's absolutely no doubt that it's important for Baltimore residents to be able to work in D.C. and vice versa," he said.

A spokeswoman for the governor referred questions about the matter to the Maryland Department of Transportation. Erin Henson, an MDOT spokeswoman, said officials there appreciate the concerns about transit cuts.

"The reality of it is, as revenues continue to decline due to the national economic downturn, all options must remain on the table," she said. "We continue to work to minimize the impact of these difficult decisions."

Joining Cole in signing the appeal to O'Malley were council members James B. Kraft, Robert W. Curran, Bill Henry, Rochelle "Rikki" Spector, Sharon Green Middleton, Helen L. Holton, Bernard C. "Jack" Young and Mary Pat Clarke.