

Thoughts on the Red Line and the Baltimore light rail system

Adam Meister, Baltimore Examiner October 16, 2008

Since I live in the 11th district I receive an email newsletter from my councilman Bill Cole. Unlike some public officials who go on vacations to Egypt, Cole's trip did give him insight in to some of Baltimore's problems. Portland is basically a clean successful upgraded west coast version of Baltimore. In the email he talks about how the light rail system there impressed him. The email is below followed by my opinion on this matter:

"Last week, I had the tremendous opportunity to travel to Portland, Oregon with a delegation of Baltimore City business and community leaders to examine that city's comprehensive public transportation system. Almost exclusively above ground, Portland has a dynamic light rail system that connects seamlessly with its bus lines and its downtown trolley line.

Transit oriented development, such as a brand new Ikea store, is being built right up to the light rail lines, as is new street-level retail. I saw an extraordinary mixed use property – retail on the first floor with both parking and apartments above – and could only think of how this would have changed our experience on Howard Street in Baltimore. The reality is that above ground rail can work if it is integrated with traffic and if the rail line doesn't create a barrier for pedestrians or cars.

Portland and its surrounding counties have made effective public transportation a priority. Believe me, it shows.

I dreamed a little bit about a Baltimore that has a truly integrated and connected public transportation system. If we take the right approach with the proposed Red Line, that dream might be a small step closer to reality."

I have also been to Portland. The light rail system does work very well there. I do not think it is the answer for Baltimore's Red Line though. Bill did not address the speed factor. A light rail is slow compared to a subway. He envisions an above ground light rail system and that is even slower than one that uses some tunnels. We need to create a system that people will use instead of driving. Speed plays a tremendous role in getting people out of their cars. A heavy rail (subway) system should be built in every major city to break people's addiction to cars/gasoline. In theory I can see massive heavy rail projects being funded by the federal government coming soon to many cities to serve as mini Roosevelt-like new deal type projects. We are about to hit a period of increased to massive unemployment in America and the government is going to have to come up with some useful public works projects. In the long run efficient heavy rail projects will save Americans billions of dollars on gas and help break our oil addiction.

We can learn from Portland's light rail system though. In Portland they have a huge farmers' market every Saturday and Sunday called "Saturday Market". It dwarfs our farmers' market under the JFX. There is a light rail station right in the middle of the market and people are constantly getting off of it and entering the market on weekends. We need to bring destinations like this to our current light rail system. We could experiment and move our farmers' market to the M&T Banks stadium parking lot right next to the light rail. I think this would encourage many people who only use the light rail to go to Artscape and sporting events to use it. It should increase attendance at the farmers' market. If it failed we could easily move the market back to under the JFX.

I do think we need to have a better public transportation plan for Metro Baltimore. I strongly suggest talking to these guys about that.