



Maryland pays \$260,900,000 as its share of WMATA's annual deficit.

There is only one sustainable way to reduce this — increase pedestrian-source ridership.

HB 948 is the key to success.

Missed opportunity for transit-oriented development in Maryland

By N.J. Slabbert
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Maryland is on the verge of missing a golden opportunity this year to promote transit-oriented development and pedestrian-friendly communities. By seeking to establish State Rail Station Overlay Districts, House Bill 948 would have been in keeping with the state's traditions of progressive government and bold experimentation in civic improvement. Although the bill was defeated in the Environmental Matters Committee this year — and there is little hope for its revival — the ideas it contains are worthy of continued discussion and debate.

The creation of overlay districts would give the state greater latitude to work with local authorities to encourage denser, more diverse development around rail stations. This is a sensible idea that stands to bring Maryland many economic, infrastructural, sustainability and other benefits, while putting the state in the national forefront of regional planning and community development leadership.

There has long been a divide in America between municipal planning and regional economic development. The two streams of discourse often pull in opposite directions, with environmental sustainability considerations frequently being caught between the two. Rarely does legislation appear that offers significant potential to promote coordinated regional planning, economic growth and environmental interests at once, integrating local and statewide perspectives as well as bringing public and private strengths together in a fertile alliance.

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The initiative for State Rail Station Overlay Districts does these things in several creative ways. It recognizes the state government's responsibility to see that a statewide infrastructure — rail transit — is put to the best possible use of the entire state. By encouraging development geared to mass transit and pedestrians, it promises to begin a **long-overdue move away from the rule of the automobile over the planning of America's townscapes**. By encouraging varied building development, replacing rigid mathematical zoning numbers with a design review process allowing flexible development around rail stations, it promotes optimal development.

Opponents argue that the bill adds nothing to policies and development instruments already in place. This claim rings hollow when viewed against the tangible evidence of the existing developed landscape. Writers and scholars on economics, architecture, sustainability and planning have produced an immense literature advocating a **return to the walkable urban spaces that were once the heart of American towns**, yet economically struggling, pedestrian-unfriendly and depressingly uniform towns remain all too conspicuous a feature of both Maryland and the nation.

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HB 948 presented a realistic way to promote the relatively rapid evolution of distinctive, mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly communities that would reflect the individual personalities of towns while not only taking intelligent, optimal advantage of an infrastructure that has already been created at great expense but also helping to promote that infrastructure. **The idea is to maximize return on an existing public investment by recognizing that the rail system is a state amenity, not a local one.**

The public treasury would benefit. Business would benefit.
Towns and their residents would benefit.
The state would benefit.
And, oh, yes — the environment would benefit too.

By re-engineering the land-use regulatory process, HB 948 not only solves the economic morass of regional rail, it lowers the cost of government, and it eliminates ethics issues and stress. And public health would get a triple-play: more walking; fewer injuries and deaths from car crashes; cleaner air.

State Rail Station Overlay Districts are a key that can help unlock the revival of small towns. They represent a rational approach to regional planning, one that American urban policymakers have been seeking for decades. If HB 948 cannot be revived during the current General Assembly session, it must be brought back and made stronger next year. **This concept represents an extraordinary opportunity for Maryland not only to help itself but to spearhead a new urban and regional planning vision for the nation.**

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