**Columbia Transitway Advocacy Group**

Website: transitwaycolumbia.org

February 28, 2020

Dear County Executive Ball,

The Columbia Transitway Advocacy Group urges inclusion of Phase 1 of the Columbia Transitway as a high priority in the Howard County Transportation Priority Letter to the Maryland Department of Transportation’s FY2021 Howard County Priority Letter to MDOT. Phase 1 is the first step toward implementing the recommendation in the 2018 Central MD Transit Development Plan which cited the Columbia Transitway as “the corridor entirely within the county most likely to support high-frequency transit.” Phase 1 will ease traffic congestion within Downtown Columbia by supplementing existing transit with a more accessible and sustainable option which is available to all ages, at all hours, in all weather.

Phase 1 will complement bicycle and pedestrian travel and existing transit by providing more frequent and easily accessible service to areas of high-density population, employment, and commercial centers. Phase 1 will run along the existing transit right-of-way to connect Howard County Hospital and Community College, village centers in Harpers Choice and Wilde Lake with Downtown Columbia, and the Transit Hub that includes proposed BRT along US29. Phase 1 would serve newly established sites of high-density housing, employment, and businesses which now contribute to problems associated with automobile traffic. Success of Phase 1 will build support to extend the Transitway across US29 along the existing transitway right-of-way with possible extensions to Gateway and the MARC train to destinations outside Howard County, including BWI airport, Baltimore and Washington.

Traffic congestion has increased dramatically since the publication of the TDP with the expansion of the Howard County hospital and opening of 230 housing units at Vista Wilde Lake, 160 units at Lakehouse Town Center in 2018, and expansion of other housing, employment, and commercial sites in Downtown Columbia. Further construction is underway at four sites between Broken Land Pkwy and Merriweather Rd. These changes suggest that projections for population and employment density in the TDP for 2040 may need to be revised.

As cited in a March 2018 article [“Urbanizing the Town Center of Columbia, Maryland”](https://www.bizjournals.com/baltimore/news/2017/02/24/the-daily-grind-columbia-baltimore-commute-times.html) in Urban Land “HHC now has approval for about 13 million square feet of new downtown development, roughly half the size of downtown Baltimore, including:

* an additional 5,500 market-rate residential units,
* 900 units of affordable housing,
* 4.3 million square feet (399,000 sq m) of new office space,
* 1.3 million square feet (400,000 sq m) of new retail space,
* and 640 new hotel rooms.

… This program adds to the current downtown, which contains the 1.4 million-square-foot mall; 900,000-square-foot Symphony Overlook offices; the former 100,000-square-foot Rouse headquarters (the building, designed by Frank Gehry, now houses a Whole Foods, spa, and office space); the 120,000-square-foot American City Building; a variety of other small office buildings; a 228-room Sheraton hotel; and the 530-unit Columbia Town Center Apartments, along with a mixture of medium-density condominiums and townhouses.”

Since the publication of the TDP, Olli (an autonomous electric minibus) has won approval for travel on Maryland roads, and is being considered for use in other urban centers. Use of such transit vehicles can reduce the construction costs and environmental impact of building the Transitway. Being convenient to residential and commercial properties, public schools and recreation sites, available in all weathers, the Transitway would likely appeal to millennials and others who can not or choose not to drive. The minibuses could be used 24/7 by old and young alike, including those with limited mobility. The concept of autonomous electric vehicles appeals to millennials and, if fitted with bicycle racks, could be used by cyclists when conditions are unfavorable for outdoor travel. Operation costs for driverless electric minibuses accessible to all would reduce transportation expenses currently borne by the County. The fact that the transit right-of-way is currently owned by the Columbia Association provides a significant financial contribution that can be used to strengthen the case for federal and state grants for construction costs.

The Columbia Transitway Advocacy Group urges Howard County to raise the priority of building Phase 1 of the Transitway. It will supplement existing transit and provide residents with a more attractive and environmentally sustainable option for commuting and getting around Columbia.

Sincerely,

Paul Verchinski

Columbia Transitway Advocacy Group