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Clarence Dickerson, Administrator

Memorandum

To: Brandee Ganz, Chief Administrative Officer

From: David Cookson, Administrative Manager, Office of Transportation *DC*

Date: December 20, 2024

Subject: Staff Testimony in support of legislation authorizing Howard County to enter into multiyear agreement with Montgomery County.

Council Bill _____ represents the enabling legislation for Howard County and Montgomery County to enter into a memorandum of understanding for the counties to collaborate to plan, design and operate a project to extend the Flash Bus Rapid Transit Service (US 29 Flash Extension Service) on US 29 to Howard County.

The US 29 Flash Extension Service will build upon the existing Flash service operated by Montgomery County, extending the service from its existing terminal stop in Burtonsville to new terminal stops in Downtown Columbia with stops on Maple Lawn Boulevard in Fulton and at the Applied Physics Laboratory on Johns Hopkins Road. This service will provide a seamless, one-seat ride for passengers traveling between key locations in Howard and Montgomery Counties, including Downtown Columbia, during peak AM and PM periods and is expected to begin in 2026. The US 29 Flash Extension Service represents a significant step toward enhancing regional connectivity and improving transit services for residents and businesses in both counties.

The memorandum of understanding defines the roles and responsibilities of each party, with the appendices providing detailed guidance and direction on how the counties will plan, design, and operate the service.

These appendices include:

- Appendix A: Vehicle Procurement and Funding Plan
- Appendix B: Joint Operating Plan
- Appendix C: BRT Station Implementation Plan
- Appendix D: Joint Marketing Plan
- Appendix E: Fare Policy Plan

Roles and Responsibilities

The memorandum of understanding outlines the roles and responsibilities for each party.

For Montgomery County:

- Operate the service and maintain the buses.
- Purchase four 40-foot electric buses with federal funding matched with Howard County funds.
- Provide reporting as required by state and federal transportation regulations.
- Implement signage, maps and other informational material to support the service

For Howard County:

- Design, construct, and maintain stations in Howard County.
- Support the procurement of buses to match the federal funding already secured.
- Fund the operating costs for the first two years of the service.
- Ensure compliance with Title VI.

For Howard and Montgomery County:

- Maintain all books and records pertaining to the US 29 Flash Extension Service in compliance with all applicable state and federal audit procedures.
- Provide personnel resources to support the project.
- Make reasonable efforts to avoid any unreasonable delay in the allocation, provision, and expenditures to support the Flash Extension Service.
- Work collaboratively to secure grants and funding
- Cooperate on marketing and public engagement efforts.

Term

The term of the memorandum of understanding is six years from the time of signing and commits Howard County to provide funding for at least two years of operations and continues operation beyond the two-year period unless the county provides written notice at least one hundred and eighty calendar days before the start of the next fiscal year.

Fiscal Impact Statement

- The buses will be purchased by Montgomery County using a \$3,350,000 Federal Congressionally Directed Spending (CDS) grant and Howard County will provide \$1,450,000 as the match. This is a one-time expense. The cost estimate is based on current cost and available production slots and could change when an order is placed.
- The operating expenses for the service are estimated at \$727,000 per year, based on the 2024 hourly cost estimate from Montgomery County. The projected 2026 hourly cost is expected to increase, reflecting inflation in materials used to maintain buses and rising driver wages. Using a 4% inflation factor, the estimated cost to provide service for two years is \$1,510,600 based on the forecasted number of service hours. The service model estimates the number of hours the service will need to operate to provide the planned number of trips. However, as the service will be also operating in existing traffic and weather conditions, the total numbers of hours, and resulting annual cost of service, will vary.
- Other costs associated with service implementation, maintenance and operations of the bus stations are estimated at \$25,000 per year. For the obligated two-year term, the total is \$50,000.
- The County will use personnel resources to support implementation and operations. This includes staff from the Office of Transportation to implement, manage, and oversee the service and the Department of Public Works to design and construct bus stops and supporting infrastructure. The Department of Police and the Department of Fire and Rescue will also support the service by responding to calls for service at bus stations and incidents involving US 29 Flash Extension operating in Howard County. For the current RTA service, these costs are absorbed into each agencies' operating budget; costs for the Flash Service Extension will be handled in the same manner.

The long-term fiscal impacts of the Flash Service Extension are expected to be manageable when all the benefits are considered as providing this service will have a net positive economic and environmental impact for Howard County by:

- Providing connections to job centers in Downtown Columbia, Maple Lawn, the Applied Physics Lab, White Oak/FDA complexes, and Downtown Silver Spring.
- Providing connections to the WMATA system and MTA's Purple Line.
- Providing reliable and consistent travel times.
- Reducing congestion and emissions on US 29 by offering an alternative travel option.
- Improving safety by providing an alternative travel option to using an automobile.
- Offering more cost-effective travel options for residents without access to an automobile.

Implementation of the US 29 Flash Extension Service is also guided by Howard County's General Plan, HoCo By Design, where this project is cited as a significant transportation investment to support growth and redevelopment in the county.

The Office of Transportation supports this legislation and recommends approval by the County Council.