

Metro woes may put federal funding for transit projects at risk

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The [deterioration of Washington's Metro system](#) could jeopardize federal funding for new transit projects in the area, including a Purple Line light-rail system in Maryland and streetcar networks in Arlington County and the District.

In awarding highly competitive funding for new projects, the Federal Transit Administration considers applicants' ability to maintain their current transit systems. Because governments in Maryland, the District and Northern Virginia are partially responsible for funding Metro, the FTA will weigh the safety and reliability of the Metro system before granting money for new transit lines, transportation planners said.

"The bottom line is, we'll have to solve the Metro problem in order to do new things," said Ronald F. Kirby, transportation planning director for the [Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments](#).

An FTA spokesman said it would be premature to say whether Metro's situation would affect a proposal's chances for federal money until transit planners submit a detailed application.

But it happened in 2008. Metro's long list of safety and infrastructure needs became a [sticking point](#) when the FTA initially balked at spending \$900 million to help extend the subway to Tysons Corner. That was before Metro had several fatal accidents and safety lapses, which prompted the Obama administration to call for [federal oversight](#) of light-rail and subway systems nationwide.

"To the extent [Metro] was a problem with Dulles rail, it's going to be an even bigger challenge for other projects now," Kirby said.

Meanwhile, Metro is struggling to find ways to close [historic gaps](#) in its operating and capital budgets, including \$11 billion in system repairs and upgrades that it has outlined for the next decade.

Some officials say they're also worried about whether Metro can absorb the transit-oriented development that Washington area land-use plans are based on. Those plans assume that focusing jobs, homes and entertainment around Metro stations will accommodate population growth, curb traffic and revitalize downtrodden areas.

"If the [Metro] rail line isn't healthy, the entire region suffers," said David F. Snyder, a Falls Church City Council member and chairman of the Council of Governments' Transportation Planning Board. "You can do all these [transit] connections and transit-oriented development, but they all assume an adequately funded and well-managed and operated system."

An interconnected system

None of the Washington area's new transit projects will compete for federal construction money for at least one or two years. By then, officials said, they hope government coffers that have emptied during the recession will have begun to recover.

Still, some local transportation planners say the potential effects of expanding the area's transit network create another layer of urgency to solving Metro's problems, which [a recent assessment](#) said could take three years. Most transit construction projects seek at least 50 percent federal funding.

FTA spokesman Paul Griffo said he could not say how Metro's funding shortages might affect other projects' chances for federal approval. He said the FTA first needs "a clear understanding of who would sponsor the projects, who would be responsible for their ongoing operations and maintenance, and what state and local funding sources would cover the costs to build them -- and whether the same sources would fund" Metro.

In the case of the [Purple Line](#), the [Maryland Transit Administration](#) would build the 16-mile light-rail line between Montgomery and Prince George's counties. Michael D. Madden, the state's Purple Line study project manager, said the state would probably operate it.

Even if technically not a Metro line, the Purple Line would feed directly into Metro's Red, Orange and Green lines, adding to constraints such as platform crowding during rush hours. Maryland transit planners estimate that 43 percent of the Purple Line's projected 64,800 daily trips would also use Metrorail. About one-third of those trips are predicted to come from new transit riders.

Madden said an east-west Purple Line would add passengers to Metro but also help relieve some of its worst "core" congestion, because a rider traveling between suburbs would no longer have to take a long, indirect subway trip via downtown Washington.

Maryland transportation officials have said they can't afford to build the \$1.68 billion project unless the federal government pays for half. The FTA is reviewing the state's preliminary designs for the Purple Line, but officials said they won't compete for federal construction money until 2013.

This summer, Madden said, the FTA will let the state know whether the project is eligible for \$25 million in federal money to pay for half of the preliminary engineering costs. Congress would then have to appropriate the money. Congress has appropriated \$3 million toward Purple Line planning, but there is no guarantee that more federal funding will follow, including for the most expensive construction phase, Madden said.

Madden said he has heard nothing from the FTA to signal that Metro would harm funding chances for the Purple Line.

"This is an entirely separate project," he said.

Maryland officials also plan to seek federal funding to build a 14-mile [Corridor Cities Transitway](#) between upper Montgomery County and Metro's Shady Grove Station on the Red Line. Its planning is behind that of the Purple Line.

Beverly K. Swaim-Staley, Maryland's transportation secretary, said Metro's safety and maintenance issues "are clearly something we need to handle immediately." She said she thinks that will happen before the Purple Line would compete for federal funding.

"I certainly hope by the time those decisions are made in a year or two that we'll be able to demonstrate we have a very good handle on [Metro's] safety issues," Swaim-Staley said.

A need for federal money

Washington area officials said they hope that new federal transportation legislation being debated in Congress will include more money for transit. They also say they are bolstered by the [Obama administration's decision](#) to

steer federal construction money toward projects that would enhance "livability," such as by generating economic development and shaping growth -- two of the Purple Line's prime objectives. Prince George's County, for example, is counting on Purple Line stations to spark redevelopment and generate jobs in older inner-Beltway communities.

[Mortimer L. Downey](#), a recently appointed federal member of the Metro board, said that other regions have received federal money to build transit lines even as they have worked to maintain their aging subways.

"They don't say you must finish your spinach before you get your dessert," Downey said of the FTA. "You have to show you're capable of running your system and following through on [local financial] commitments. . . . They will raise the question, but I don't think it will be a make-or-break issue for a particular project."

Several advocates of the Dulles rail project, the Silver Line, said they viewed the attention to Metro's problems during their funding battles as a political red herring raised by some Bush administration officials more concerned about the project's scope and management. Building the Silver Line from Tysons Corner to Dulles International Airport is not related to Metro's finances because the project would be funded primarily from revenue from the [Dulles Toll Road](#) and a special taxing district.

Several local officials said they hope they'll benefit from the fact that their projects might connect to the Metro system but, unlike the Dulles rail extension, wouldn't become part of it.

Arlington Transportation Director Dennis Leach said officials are considering whether to seek federal money to build a \$165 million [streetcar line along Columbia Pike](#) between the Pentagon City Metro station and Baileys Crossroads in Fairfax County.

"I think the smaller bus rapid transit or streetcar projects aren't in the same category" as the Silver Line, Leach said. "They're smaller and don't tie as directly into Metro's operations."

D.C. transportation officials said they're not concerned about Metro affecting their chances of clinching money for a K Street Transitway or a 37-mile streetcar system. They said they plan to enter the federal funding competition in about two years. The city is using local money to begin laying streetcar tracks in Anacostia and along H Street and Benning Road in Northeast Washington.

"The FTA has not led us to believe that any of the [D.C. Department of Transportation's] transit projects would be competing for funding with Metro's regional priorities," said DDOT Director [Gabe Klein](#).

But Robert Puentes, a transportation and urban planning expert at the Brookings Institution in Washington, said Metro's problems are a "legitimate concern." With federal money for transit construction so tight and in such demand across the country, he said, the FTA will want proof that any systems the federal government helps pay to build will have sufficient local financial backing to operate safely.

"I don't think we should necessarily stop planning for [transit] expansion, because clearly there are a lot of needs out there," Puentes said. "But job one should be dealing with the financial problems Metro already has."