

# The Washington Post

February 4, 2019

## **Your hunt for a home should include research on the neighborhood's long-term transit plan**



*Some Silver Spring, Md., homeowners say they fear a proposal to expand the Beltway in their neighborhood could harm their property values. (Katherine Frey/THE WASHINGTON POST)*

Homeowners have learned the hard way how transit policy can severely impact the value of their homes, for better or worse. Most transit projects can take years or decades to plan and complete, but property values can soar or plummet at the mere mention of them.

Real-time cases-in-point -- two East Coast communities are in the middle of heated battles over proposals to alter or close critical modes of transportation for millions of daily commuters: The proposal to widen the Beltway in Maryland and, in New York City, the long-time threat to temporarily close the L Train and to reroute the crumbling Brooklyn-Queens Expressway (BQE) while they undergo repairs are a source of anxiety for many property owners.

I found that homeowners, understandably, mostly worry about the value of their homes when choosing sides on the debate. Those living in close proximity to the Beltway, for example, are particularly fearful that construction noise and encroachment of expanded

lanes into their backyards will significantly hurt values. Losing their homes to eminent domain -- the government's right to purchase private property for public use -- is of particular concern to those homeowners whose homes are already within yards of the sound barrier.

An exact expansion plan has not been officially announced by the state of Maryland -- there are currently multiple options being considered -- but rumors are spreading among homeowners, heightening fear and anxiety of what's to come.

"My house will most certainly be affected," said Abbe Spokane, a resident of the Indian Spring community in Silver Spring. "My house faces a narrow strip of green space and on the other side is the sound barrier. Someone told me they won't move the sound barrier closer to my home but how is that possible if they add lanes?"

"We don't know what is going to happen," said Sarah Cotterill, another Indian Spring resident.

"Everyone is in limbo."

Carol Rubin, special project manager of the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, said the project is in the early study stages with 15 alternative plans being considered. The commission is a cooperating agency in the project and is working with multiple counties as well as federal and state agencies on the study. Rubin said they hope to narrow the list of options by this summer.

Adding lanes to the Beltway is just one of the 15 options. Creating a two-tiered highway is another option under consideration.

"Until the project is more defined, there is no way to know what the impact will be and how it will affect home values," Rubin wrote in a recent email.

The impact on entire neighborhoods is also up in the air.

Spokane and other Indian Spring residents I interviewed said they fear that losing all or part of the local YMCA and its amenities will seriously reduce the value of their neighborhood.

The YMCA is a huge draw for families," said Spokane. The YMCA is located immediately inside the Beltway off the Colesville Road exit. "I took swimming lessons in the same pool where my children take lessons."

The Maryland Transit Opportunities Commission, an organization comprised of concerned citizens from Montgomery County, Southern Maryland, Baltimore County, Prince Georges County and Howard County, is opposed to the expansion project. The organization's core belief is that investing in additional passenger rail lines is the optimal way of decreasing congestion on highways and increasing property values.

“Any transportation policy affects real estate values,” said Benjamin Ross, chairman of the commission and author of “Dead End: Suburban Sprawl and the Rebirth of American Urbanism.” “Current trends are people want to move closer in. They want shorter commutes. Investing in rail transportation makes more sense.”

Not everyone is opposed to the Beltway expansion. Some argue that relieving congestion on highways will entice people to move to the area and, thus, will increase home values.

“Buyers live in D.C. while they are single and then move to the suburbs when they get married and start families,” said Carl Becker, a real estate broker with Premier Properties in Bethesda. “When I’m showing properties, buyers get on their phones and calculate the commute time to get to work.”

According to Becker, buyers are looking in Virginia because traffic is too congested in Maryland.

“Buyers are gravitating to Virginia because it’s easier to get to D.C.,” he said. “It’s hard to sell a home in Potomac or Darnestown now because of the traffic. It takes too long to get to work.”

“I don’t like traffic either,” said Spokane, who is opposed to the expansion. “I drive on the Beltway every day. But would rather have better public transit options whether or not my house would be impacted.”

Some say that highways are an outdated mode of transportation.

“It’s a throwback to the Eisenhower era of building more and more highways,” said Cotterill, who has lived in her Indian Spring home with her husband Phillip for 40 years. “It’s not forward thinking.”

Many homeowners are struggling with the idea of selling their homes now or staying put until more details are provided.

The proposal could affect home sales. Sellers are required to disclose to potential buyers any pertinent information that could impact the value of their home -- including talks about possible nearby highway expansion.

“A seller should disclose what they know,” said Marilyn Emery, a real estate agent with RLAH in Chevy Chase. “I can’t imagine that won’t have an impact on the decision of a buyer to buy a home.”

In most county sales contracts, buyers are informed prior to signing that they have the right to examine the jurisdiction’s Master Plan and any municipal land use plans. Buyers must sign the stipulation -- contained in an addendum -- confirming that they understand

their rights. There is a problem with that -- the Beltway expansion is not mentioned in the Master Plan.

“Frankly, anyone buying a home should do their due diligence,” said Rubin of the commission. “It’s all over the news.”

The Washington region is not the only metropolitan area with public transportation nightmares. Residents in Brooklyn, N.Y., are experiencing transit-induced, whiplash from the on-again-off-again plans for shutting down the L train and the constantly changing plans for the BQE.

“Our lives changed when the L Train shutdown was announced,” said Lior Barak, a real estate broker with the Barak Blackburn Team of Compass in Brooklyn. “The L Train is the oxygen line of North Brooklyn. People started to worry about how they would get to work.”

According to Barak, the rental and sales markets took a severe hit.

“Rents dropped by 18 to 25 percent and landlords were offering unheard of incentives to fill up vacancies,” Barak said. “I had a unit listed for sale for eight months. We had to drop the price two times and had no offers.”

In early January, a new plan was unexpectedly announced -- the rail line will stay open while making repairs.

“The weekend after the shutdown was canceled, we received three offers. One was full price,” Barak said.

But the relief didn’t last long. Concerns about passenger safety -- riding a rail line while it is being repaired -- is inducing renewed fear that the shutdown plans will proceed, spiking mass anxiety once again.

When searching for a home to buy, you should always compare kitchens, bathrooms and bedrooms. I also suggest that municipal plans for trains, planes and automobiles be another trifecta of consideration.