



Mass transit and conservation may prevail after years of controversy  
**M-83, a Possible Light at the End of the Tunnel**

By Jeff Barber  
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Mass transit advocates and Montgomery County community groups are hoping the end may finally be in sight in their years-long battle against a proposed four-lane highway that would run nearly six miles from Gaithersburg to Clarksburg.

The proposed Midcounty Highway Extended, designated M-83, would run east of and roughly parallel to I-270 and MD-355 and advocates argue it is needed to reduce congestion between the rapidly growing Clarksburg area and southern Montgomery County.

But the highway, which was first proposed by county transportation planners in the mid-1960s before passage of the federal Clean Water Act, would impact 2.5 acres of wetlands, five acres of flood plain, 49 acres of park land, 17 acres of farmland and 72 acres of forest and carries a price tag in excess of \$350 million.

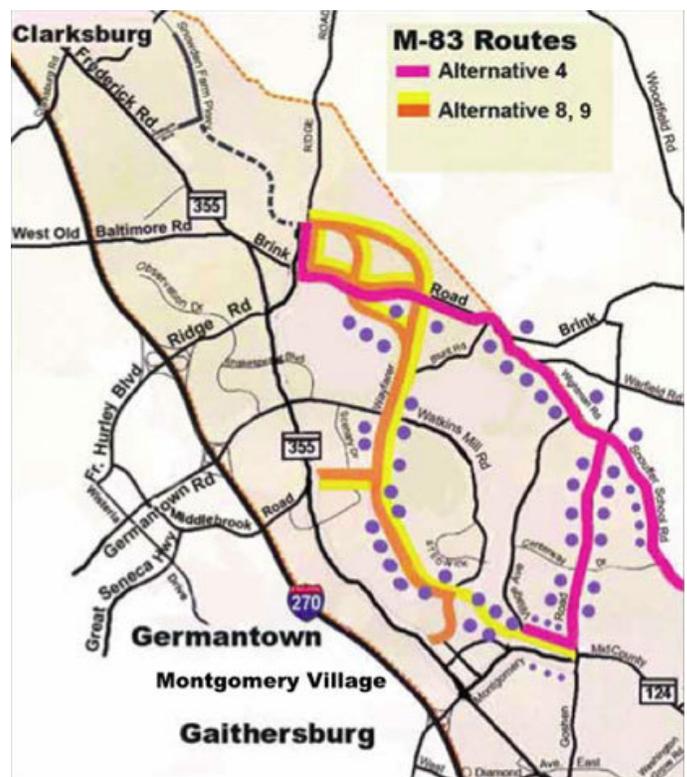
The on-again, off-again battle over the highway was renewed when the Montgomery County Council in 2004 asked the county Department of Transportation to study the project to determine whether it could be built under current environmental laws, according to David Alpert, founder of Greater Greater Washington, a regional blog.

Under pressure from the county council, MCDOT in March issued the long-awaited report and recommended Alternative 9A, the original alignment from the 1960s master plan.

Shortly after the report was released, County Executive Ike Leggett told the Washington Post he was opposed to the project because of its costs and acting MCDOT Director Al Roshdieh in early April issued a statement that appeared to back away from the highway, saying there is no money in the county's capital budget to build it and MCDOT's report was conducted before the proposed rapid bus transit system along Route 355 was included in the master plan.

Talks between MCDOT, the US Army Corps of Engineers, the US Environmental Protection Agency and the Maryland Department of Environment aimed at determining whether the highway could be built were supposed to begin in late April, but a planned meeting of the four agencies was canceled, Kelly Blynn, a campaign manager with the Coalition for Smarter Growth, said.

Margaret Schoap of the [TAME Coalition](#), which opposes the highway, said the meeting was canceled the agency more time to consider alternatives in the master plan, including the Route 355 bus rapid transit line, improved traffic management and upgrades to 355. Schoap said her group met with MCDOT officials and that they are "working hard to come up with alternatives" to M-83.



She said a key thing to watch for is whether the county includes funding for the study in its next annual budget, which is due to be completed later this month. But even if it does not, Schoap said the money could be added later through an amendment.

Both Blynn and Schoap said M-83 can't be declared dead until the council votes to remove it from the master plan, something they hope is in the offing. Blynn said six of the council's nine members oppose the highway.

Just when the council may vote on whether to pull M-83 from the master plan is something of an open question, but Blynn believes it could come this year.

"We understand that people living in Clarksburg and other upcounty communities need transportation options and that Clarksburg was designed to have high-quality transit," Blynn said. "Now with the Bus Rapid Transit under study for 355, high-quality transit for Clarksburg, Germantown and Gaithersburg is more possible than ever. That combined with better traffic management, improvements to existing roads and better access to MARC could provide an excellent suite of alternatives to improve commuting for upcounty residents."

She added that if MCDOT opts to withdraw its study and recommend the alternatives, then the way would be clear for the council to vote as early as the fall to end any further consideration of M-83. Blynn added that those who support environmental and sustainable transportation need to continue to make their views known to their council members.

Schoap is also hopeful, but is taking a slightly longer view. "We want to make sure this is concluded and decided in the current election cycle, rather than watch it slip away as we have over the last six election cycles." The project, she said, has been a "hot potato" of the last several elections.

"We are now at the point of making a decision," Schoap said.

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