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## Commissioners approve creation of Montgomery County Transportation Authority (VIDEO)

Monday, November 1, 2010

By Keith Phucas

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The Montgomery County Commissioners voted 2-1 to form a Transportation Authority Wednesday, Oct. 27, to help streamline property condemnation for current and future transportation projects.

Commissioners James R. Matthews and Joseph M. Hoeffel voted in favor of the new authority, while Commissioner Bruce L. Castor Jr. cast a nay vote calling the resolution's language too broad.



Nine board members were picked by the commissioners to begin work "immediately" and serve until Jan. 1, 2011.

Before the vote, the Planning Commission's Assistant Director Leo Bagley said the county should not depend any longer on Washington or Harrisburg to approve funding for road improvements.

The planning board had proposed a referendum on transportation spending in 2009, but the ailing economy put a damper on those plans. At a recent meeting, the planners voted once again to recommend a transportation authority to the commissioners.

"It was a unanimous decision out of that meeting that we proceed with a county bond referendum toward identifying

projects, and moving towards solutions for our own selves," he said.

Previously, Bagley predicted major highways would become toll roads in the future, but Policy Chief Steve Nelson dispelled rumors that county officials wanted to create the authority in order to create toll roads.

Bill Caldwell, Norristown Council president, said the authority would be key in revitalizing Norristown and he cited The Lafayette Street Corridor project, which is slated to begin in 2011, and the planned widening of Ridge Pike as centrally important to that goal.

"This is something near and dear to the hearts of everyone in Norristown," he said. "We really believe without (the transportation authority), there would be a significant decrease in our ability to bring about economic revitalization, particularly commercial redevelopment, and that we feel we so desperately need."

Ruth Miller, an East Norriton resident, raised concerns about the proposed authority's powers to condemn real estate for projects.

"I'm not for forming yet another board of people not elected, that don't represent necessarily the interest of the residents," she said. "What is our recourse when they claim property, and they have this eminent domain power?"

Solicitor Barry Miller said the planned authority would give the county the power to condemn property, which it once had, but that state law doesn't currently allow.

The authority would not have the power to raise its own funds, and Matthews said the cost to taxpayers would be "zero."

"That's why we're having a committee of nine citizens, not one person, not some czar who's going to come in and make all the final rules against the sensitivities of people like yourself," he told the East Norriton woman.

Though Castor agreed that the county should have eminent domain powers to move ahead with projects to relieve traffic congestion and help economic development, he saw the resolution's language as overly broad.

"I agree with the goals that we have stated for (the purpose of) revitalization and improving transportation," he said. "I don't immediately see the connection between forming an authority and the accomplishment of those goals."

According to the resolution, the transportation authority would be organized to "own, operate and maintain" transportation improvements other than mass transit, which would include roads, bridges, tunnels, highways, parkways, traffic distribution centers and even parking spaces.

"That sounds like an awfully broad mandate of authority when the reason why we are needing to go in this direction is to simply recover the power of eminent domain," he said.

Castor believes the county could achieve the authority's goals "in house and ourselves without creating this board."

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