

January 6, 2020

Dear Treasurer Kopp,

I am writing with great concern about the recent decisions to reopen the public private partnership approach to expanding highway capacity along Interstate-495 and Interstate-270 in the Washington Metropolitan region. I am writing out of concern as a tax payer, a citizen, and a father of young children.

There are numerous reasons why these road expansions should not occur. For one, evidence from the last several decades has shown that road expansions do not relieve congestion due to induced demand.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, the International Panel on Climate Change found that we need to eliminate emissions by 2050 in order to stave off the worst of climate change, and putting more single occupancy vehicles on the road continues to put Maryland on the wrong path, especially when 45 percent of Maryland's greenhouse gas emissions already come from transportation.<sup>23</sup>

But I want to focus my reasoning in this letter on a recent report from the National Academies of Science, titled "Traffic Forecasting Accuracy Assessment Research", which shows the need to scrutinize the projections that are being pointed to as evidence of the feasibility of these projects.<sup>4</sup> This study has also been attached.

Of course it is hard to evaluate how the projections being made for these projects stand up to scrutiny since that data is not being released, so one can only assume that the flaws found in other studies are in the work that is leading Maryland on the path to more highway miles.

This study examined nearly 1,300 projects in the United States and Europe. And what they found should give Marylanders pause as to whether these projects are going to meeting the financial feasibility we are being sold.

Firstly, the study found that on average traffic volume was 6% lower than projections, which is certainly a result that should point to increased scrutiny of the projections being used to make this decision. But as the research went on there are other factors that should give Marylanders even more pause.

For one the researchers found that "the unemployment rate in the opening year is an important determinant of forecast accuracy" and "[transportation] forecasts implicitly assume that economic conditions present in the year the forecast is made will perpetuate." If that is holding up in the word completed to justify expanding our highways we are in a world of problem. The most recent unemployment rate data available from the Bureau of Labor Statistics shows a rate of 3.5 percent and

---

<sup>1</sup> "CityLab University: Induced Demand." September 6, 2018. <https://www.citylab.com/transportation/2018/09/citylab-university-induced-demand/569455/>

<sup>2</sup> The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change . "Global Warming of 1.5 °C." October 2018. <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>

<sup>3</sup> "Maryland 2017 Periodic GHG Emissions Inventory" <https://mde.maryland.gov/programs/Air/ClimateChange/Pages/GreenhouseGasInventory.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> Erhardt, G., J. Hoque, M. Chen, R. Souleyrette, D. Schmitt, A. Chaudhary, S. Rapolu, K. Kim, S. Weller, E. Sall, and M. Wachs. 2019. Traffic Forecasting Accuracy Assessment Research. Pre-publication draft of NCHRP Research Report 934. Transportation Research Board, Washington, D.C.

the stock market is breaking records every month, but we cannot expect either of these factors to last over the next ten to twenty years.<sup>56</sup> The paper predicts that even a modest increase in unemployment, to hypothetically 8.5 percent, would result in a 15 percent drop vehicle usage. This evidence does not bode well for the financial viability of the I-270 and I-495 expansion projects.

Later the researchers completed a “deep dive” into six specific projects in the United States. The deep dives showed particular points to be wary of. Over predictions of 43, 60, 16, 27, and 5 percent occurred in five of the six case studies. Data could not be completed on the sixth, which was a public-private partnership in San Diego, and that was because it went bankrupt. The reasons for the over prediction in all of these cases were diverse and this provides another reason for scrutiny of the I-270 and I-495 expansion projects.

Another finding in the “deep dives” was the problem of “optimism bias.” Specifically, they found “for each project, the observed traffic is less than forecast, and for all except [one], correcting for the factors listed reduces the difference between the forecast and observed traffic” meaning that correcting the optimism can solve the problems with the forecast. But given the political hype behind I-270 and I-495 expansion projects one cannot help but expect that optimism bias is high with the world being completed by the Maryland Department of Transportation, which would imply that these projects won’t hold up to the financial promises we are being told of.

This is only one piece of evidence, but we are constantly seeing throughout the country that road expansion does not work. Modelers pick the rosier pictures so that highway projects can go forward and tax payers are stuck paying the financial bill and our children are stuck paying the climate bill. Marylanders need to start making 21<sup>st</sup> Century decision and not keeping making the same bad choices. I call on you to demand more transparency on the I-270 and I-495 expansion projects, place intense scrutiny on the projections if they are ever provided, and consider alternatives that don’t put cars on the road, but are intended to get people places.

Thanks,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Joseph Jakuta".

Joseph Jakuta  
Mount Rainier, MD

Attachment (1)

---

<sup>5</sup> <https://data.bls.gov/timeseries/LNS14000000>

<sup>6</sup> CNN Business. “The stock market is on fire. History shows that won’t last.” January 3, 2020.  
<https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/03/investing/stock-market-record-high/index.html>