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## Proposed trolley system faces community, financial challenges

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The proposed development of a fixed rail trolley connecting Homewood to the Inner Harbor has progressed since it was first granted \$200,000 in June 2007 by the Baltimore Board of Estimates and the Charles Village Development Corporation.

Kristen Speaker of the Development Corporation estimates that the project will cost \$156,000,000 until its projected opening in 2012.

The project, however, is not without its critics. Nor is it certain that it will actually happen.

David Hill, executive director of the Charles Village Benefits District, summed up the current situation as one in which the "trolley is beginning to percolate to [the] top. People are becoming aware of the issues" involved. Hill contends that those in the community who have come out against the development are "not representative of the community as a whole."

"The more informed people are [about the trolley development] the more concerned they are," said Paul Warren, chair of the Committee for Development and Zoning for the Mt. Vernon-Belvedere Association.

Under the plan, \$85,000,000 for the project will be raised by so-called TIF, or tax incremental financing. This system, which has been employed throughout the nation by municipalities to raise funds for redevelopment project, creates a special tax zone in the area which would supposedly benefit from the development.

Bonds are issued based on the forecasted increase in tax revenue due to the increase in the designated area. Speaker, of the Development Corporation, said that the rest of the funding would come from "state and federal" sources.

On Sept. 12, the Development Corporation presented for public review a draft of an act which would create a special tax district within one quarter of a mile east and west of Charles Street, running from University Parkway in the north to Conway Street in the south. Commercial properties and real estate properties would face an increase of .05 percent, or \$50 per \$100,000. Under the proposed legislation to create a Charles Street Trolley Authority, nonprofit organizations such as Hopkins, the Baltimore Museum of Art and area hospitals, would be expected to make "voluntary" contributions equal to what they would pay as a non-tax exempt property. The draft goes on to state that if non-profits did not contribute their proscribed amount, the authority would "dissolve."

With an institution so many times larger than any other tax-exempt institution along the proposed route, it would seem that this project relies on Hopkins's support.

"The financial plan has Hopkins share at a relatively small amount. There is a lot of discussion yet to

Dr. McGill of Hopkins echoed this view.

"Spurring development along the route is just one [objective in building the trolley]," he said.

"Even if that were the only one, it is advantageous to students, faculty and staff at Johns Hopkins to have a more vibrant, safer, higher quality of life corridor that connects us to the Inner Harbor and the many cultural institutions." McGill said that Hopkins also supports the project because "the trolley will help on the 'greening' objectives we all share, enticing less use of cars."

Ed Meyers, of the firm Kittleston and Associates, which is helping the Development Corporation work out the trolley proposal, agreed that it would increase the ridership for public transportation because it would attract a population which "doesn't ride the bus but would ride the rails."

To Pam Wilson of the Peabody Heights Resident Homeowners Alliance, this position is "elitist."

The perception that Hopkins is helping to bankroll a non-integrated, customized transportation line so that its students do not have to ride MTA buses is just one of many reasons community members have lined up against the streetcar, says Wilson.

Ed Hayes, a resident of Remington and an opponent of the trolley, put his concerns about the trolley in stark terms. He believes that it would be a "gated transportation system" which would only serve to connect the "all white Charles Village to the all white Inner Harbor."

Residents also find issue with what they clearly perceive to be an economic development project being sold by developers as a move to improve transportation. They caution that in the current turbulent economic climate, moving forward with such a large project would be imprudently risky.

Gewirtz called the empty lot on the future site of the Olmstead development "exhibit A" of overzealous development projects.

Residents of various neighborhoods encompassed in the special tax zone have put up a Web site ([www.trolleytrouble.org](http://www.trolleytrouble.org)) which serves to publicize their questions and concerns about the project.

The mayor's office as well as the offices of City Council President Stephanie Rawlings-Blake and city council woman Mary Pat Clark were unavailable for comment.

Proponents of the trolley draw parallels to a similar development a decade ago in Portland, Oregon as a model for the Baltimore development.

"Having such a transportation mode enhances quality in cities that have built trolleys," McGill said. "The areas along the trolley are vibrant, welcoming and inclusive - a far cry from 10 years ago, pre-trolley, when they were run-down and unsafe."

Some local residents have suggested alternate routes for a trolley, such as a line that would run north to south along Greenmont Avenue.

They contend that if the trolley were build there instead of on Charles Street, it might bring economic development to areas which are more readily associated with being run-down, unsafe and in need of economic stimulation.