



Maryland and Purple Line contractor ‘still far apart’ on line’s cost and opening date

The contractor says delays have added \$300 million to project’s cost; state officials say that’s too much.

By **Katherine Shaver**

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Maryland officials and the contractor building the Purple Line are “still far apart” over when the light-rail line will begin carrying passengers and how much it will cost to offset construction delays, a top state transit official said Thursday.

The contractor, a consortium called Purple Line Transit Partners, has told the state that the line will cost an additional \$300 million to build because of delays caused by a lawsuit and the state lagging behind in acquiring property. That figure includes \$60 million that the contractor says would be needed in “acceleration costs” to open the line in March 2023. The state is still pushing for an opening in late 2022.

Charles Lattuca, head of project delivery for the Maryland Transit Administration, told the Montgomery County Council's transportation committee Thursday that he doesn't consider the \$300 million to be a cost overrun because state officials haven't agreed to pay it.

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"Just because the claim is for X amount of dollars doesn't mean that's what the claim is going to be," Lattuca told the committee.

"We disagree with what they're asking for," Lattuca said after the briefing.

"We're still far apart on a settlement, but we're talking. . . . We're having very informative arguments about what the costs should be and who should pay them."

The 16-mile Purple Line, which is in its second year of construction, will connect Montgomery and Prince George's counties inside the Capital Beltway and link Maryland's spokes of the Metro system with Amtrak and MARC commuter rail stations. It is believed to be the first direct suburb-to-suburb rail line in the country, allowing passengers to ride a train without having to pass through downtown Washington.

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The Purple Line also has attracted national attention because it is being financed and built via a \$5.6 billion public-private partnership, one of the most far-reaching of any U.S. transit project.

Lattuca said the contractor is seeking \$199 million, up from \$164 million a few months ago, for delays related to an ultimately unsuccessful lawsuit that stalled the construction launch by a year. The additional \$100 million being sought would cover delays stemming from the late land acquisitions and the \$60 million to accelerate work.

The \$300 million is an increase from \$275 million that the contractor told the state in December would be necessary to compensate for delays, according to a project report. If paid, cost overruns in that range would put the project's \$2.4 billion construction 11 percent to 12 percent over budget.

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“We think it's far less,” Lattuca said later of any cost overruns. “We're so far apart.”

Lattuca said the matter could end up in court and be settled years after construction is finished. The project's final cost, he said, won't be known until a settlement is reached.

The Purple Line hasn't had an agreed-upon master schedule since March 2017, five months before construction started.

Lattuca said the state is continuing to press the contractor to find more ways to condense the schedule, such as by paying overtime or working more on weekends.

Fred Craig, chief executive of Purple Line Transit Partners, told the council the consortium is still trying to meet the state's goal of an opening in late 2022.

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"This schedule is getting incredible scrutiny to try to bring that date back to one that's acceptable to the MTA," Craig said.

Council member Evan Glass (D-At Large) told project officials that he wanted more details about how the Purple Line budget is being spent and how much the project will cost.

"I agree with you that people want a system that is safe and that is done well and done quickly," Glass said. "They also want a system that is built on budget."

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Katherine Shaver is a transportation and development reporter focusing on urban/suburban planning issues and construction of Maryland's light-rail Purple Line. Since joining The Washington Post in 1997, she also has covered crime, courts, education and local government. Follow 

