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MARC aims to triple service

28-year plan calls for more trains, track, 2008 weekend runs

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The Maryland Transit Administration is planning a sweeping expansion of its popular but crowded MARC commuter train service, including weekend runs and additional weekday trains by next year and a tripling of the system's capacity by 2035.

The detailed blueprint, outlined in a briefing by MTA Administrator Paul J. Wiedefeld, envisions a system that eventually would stretch from Virginia to Delaware and have the capacity to carry more than 100,000 riders a day.

The plan, the cost of which would amount to billions of dollars over the next 28 years, would add tracks in areas that are bottlenecks and would increase the frequency of train arrivals. It would bring new interconnections with existing and future transit lines and create a new transportation hub at Johns Hopkins Bayview Medical Center.

Although many of the changes would not occur until much of today's work force is long retired, the plan also includes improvements that current riders would see between now and next summer.

MTA's near-term plans include additional trains on the Penn Line, some of which would operate on weekends, and a midday train on the Camden Line.

MARC's Penn, Camden and Brunswick lines now run on weekdays only. The Washington-to-Baltimore Camden Line runs at peak hours only -- a deterrent to potential riders who worry about having to return home early in an emergency.

Wiedefeld cautioned that many of the changes require the assent of CSX Corp., which owns the Camden Line and Western Maryland's Brunswick Line, and Amtrak, which owns the Perryville-to-Washington Penn Line.

But the administrator, a former chief executive of Baltimore-Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport, said he has begun negotiating with the two railroads on adding trains.

The MARC service has been growing steadily in popularity in recent years as long-distance commuters have sought alternatives to congested highways and relief from high gasoline prices. Daily boardings, which were fewer than 20,000 in the mid-1990s, now exceed 30,000.

That growth is good news for the MTA and the environment, but not for riders' comfort. The system has only 27,000 seats, and many trains run with passengers standing.

"There are certain trains that are so crowded the conductors can't get through the trains anymore," said Christopher Field, a regular rider of the Penn Line. "Extra seats are more than welcome, and weekend service would be an absolute thrill."

Wiedefeld said the number of riders has been increasing at a rate of 6 percent a year, which he attributed largely to highway congestion.

"We expect this demand to grow," he said.

In addition to crowded trains and overflowing parking lots, the MARC service has been beset by track and equipment problems that have cut its reliability -- defined as arrival within six minutes of the scheduled time -- to about 90 percent, Wiedefeld said. The MTA's goal is to improve that performance to 95 percent or more.

The plan is broken into five stages: the improvements to be made over the next nine months; intermediate stages in 2010, 2015 and 2020; and a long-range plan extending to 2035.

Such long-range plans have been a recurring phenomenon in Maryland transportation. Some have been carried out, but others -- notably Baltimore's planned regional Metro subway system of the 1970s -- have been consigned to history's dustbin as the projected expenses grew.

But Wiedefeld's MARC plan, which he said he drafted at the direction of Transportation Secretary John D. Porcari, has several powerful imperatives driving it.

One is the military's base realignment and closure process -- known as BRAC -- which is expected to bring thousands of jobs to Maryland over the coming decade. Two of the areas that will see the most job growth are Fort Meade and Aberdeen Proving Ground -- both of which lie along the MARC Penn Line.

Another is the obsolescence of the Amtrak and CSX tunnels through Baltimore. The plan envisions a new Amtrak tunnel leading to Penn Station by 2020 and a new CSX freight tunnel by 2035 -- allowing the Howard Street Tunnel, the scene of a near-disastrous fire in 2001, to be converted to passenger use.

MARC has had a sometimes difficult relationship with Amtrak and CSX, neither of which is focused on commuter rail. But Wiedefeld said he expects the two railroads to work closely with MARC on system expansion because all will benefit.

"It has to be done in partnership with Amtrak and CSX," he said.

Over the next nine months, Wiedefeld said, MARC plans a series of improvements in customer service -- including an overhaul of an electronic passenger alert system that now often delivers news of problems hours after the information would be useful. Between now and next summer, he said, he hopes to add 1,500 seats per day. An additional 4,000 would be added by 2010.

The 2015 phase of the plan is expected to bring a more drastic expansion -- especially on the Penn Line. Under the plan, MARC's busiest line would gain 12,000 seats and would be extended to Elkton and Newark, Del., where it would connect with the commuter rail systems serving Philadelphia and Wilmington, Del.

The plan also calls for expanded service by 2015 at Odenton and at a new Aberdeen station to accommodate BRAC-related riders. It also envisions a new station at Bayview, which would eventually connect with the planned east-west transit service known as the Red Line. Penn Line trains would run every 15 minutes at peak times and 30 minutes off-peak.

By 2020, the plan calls for an extension of all three MARC lines across the Potomac River to Northern Virginia -- giving BRAC workers rapid-rail access to the Pentagon and the concentration of military offices in Crystal City. For the Penn Line, it anticipates a new Amtrak tunnel through Baltimore, helping to alleviate the current speed restrictions.

By 2035, most of the Penn Line would have four tracks, allowing more flexible scheduling for MARC and Amtrak. The Penn Line also would connect with the Baltimore Metro at its Upton Station and an anticipated station north of Johns Hopkins Hospital.

Presuming that the Howard Street Tunnel will at some point no longer be needed for freight traffic, the plan also calls for the Camden Line to be extended to the north and east. The outline shows the Camden using the track of what is known as the old Belt Line to make stops at the old Mount Royal Station, Charles Village and Clifton Park before meeting up with the Penn Line at Bayview.

Ed Cohen, president of the Transit Riders Action Council, said the Camden proposal is an "efficient use of constrained resources."

"This is a way of utilizing a resource that already exists," he said.

Wiedefeld said that in coming weeks, he will meet with legislative leaders and other MARC stakeholders to outline the financial details behind the proposal.

The MTA chief said the expansion of MARC -- with a large percentage of high-income riders -- would not come at the expense of other transit services such as the bus system, light rail and the Metro.

"We shouldn't think of this as a Gucci system," he said. "This is moving toward more of an urban commuter rail system."

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MARC plan highlights

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The Maryland Transit Administration's MARC plan sets an on-time performance goal of better than 95 percent for all three existing lines by 2035. Here are some details about the plan:

Penn Line: Perryville to Washington; 19,000 daily trips

2010

- Add 3,400 seats
- Additional peak-hour trains
- Late evening, weekend service

2015

- Add 12,000 seats
- Longer trains
- Increased train stops at Aberdeen
- Extension of line to Newark, Del.
- Connect with future Baltimore Red Line
- New Bayview station
- Rebuild BWI station

2020

- Add 16,000 seats
- Limited-stop trains at 30-minute intervals
- Extension to Northern Virginia
- Added peak express service
- New Gunpowder River crossing
- Further expansion of Aberdeen service
- New Amtrak tunnel in Baltimore

2035

- Add 13,000 seats
- "Transit-like" four-track service through Baltimore
- Connect to Baltimore Metro
- New crossings of Bush and Susquehanna rivers

Camden Line: Baltimore to Washington; 4,500 daily trips

2010

- Add 400 seats
- Lengthen trains
- Add midday trains

2015

- Add 2,200 seats
- Additional peak-hour trains
- Connecting buses to BRAC sites

2020

- Add 6,600 seats
- Cut peak intervals to 20 minutes
- Northern Virginia extension
- Limited midday service

2035

- Add 4,000 seats
- Weekend service
- Extension to Bayview
- Charles Village, Clifton Park service

Brunswick Line: Martinsburg, W.Va. to Washington; 7,000 daily trips

2010

- Add 200 seats
- Lengthen trains

2015

- Add 3,800 seats
- Increased Frederick service
- More express trains

2020

- Add 8,400 seats
- Reduce peak intervals to 15-20 minutes
- Expanded off-peak service
- Northern Virginia extension
- Weekend service
- New reverse peak* service

2035

- Add 7,000 seats
- Increase weekday service
- Weekend service

* Reverse peak service moves in the direction opposite of peak morning or evening travel. The Brunswick line now runs only eastbound in the morning and westbound in the evening.