

December 1, 2011

Maryland Transportation Secretary Discusses Funding Issues at Chamber of Commerce Lunch

Maryland Transportation Secretary Beverley K. Swaim-Staley told more than 100 area business leaders on Tuesday that the economy is challenging but, "I am going to be optimistic."

After several years of focusing on "preservation and maintenance," of the state's transportation system, she is hopeful that state and federal funding bills under consideration will provide money for some important transportation construction projects.

Swaim-Staley spoke as part of a series of Member Lunches held by the Howard County Chamber of Commerce. These lunches give members a chance to hear from notable speakers on topics of importance to the business community.

Swaim-Staley said bridges and highway surfaces are priorities for her department, and that Maryland is in better shape than other states on those issues. The opening of the newest section of the Intercounty Connector is also a great accomplishment, she said.

In terms of funding, she said, "There is still a lot of work to do on the federal level," but both the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives are at least recognizing the need for transportation funding and are considering bills.

At the state level, the Blue Ribbon Commission on Maryland Transportation Funding has made recommendations intended to raise a target amount of roughly \$800 million dollars for transportation projects. A 15-cent motor fuel tax phased in over three years, increased registration and titling fees, and increased transit fares are among the panel's suggestions, which are being considered by the state legislature.

Information about the Commission and a copy of its final report is available at www.mdot.maryland.gov/Planning/BRC.

That money would not allow the state to complete the 9 to 10 billion dollars worth of projects being planned, or the billions of dollars needed to fund priorities outlined by the state's counties and jurisdictions, Swaim-Staley said, but "It would allow us to move forward with projects that are on hold."

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Secretary Swaim-Staley speaks at the Chamber's Member Lunch. Photo by Micki Bittner, Bittner Photography and Graphics.

“I’ve been pleased with how the recommendations were received,” she said. “I think it did start a very good dialogue. ... There is an appreciation for the need across the state, but disagreement over how to meet that need.”

When asked to predict the chances that the “gas tax” would pass the legislature, the Secretary noted that the Senate President supports it while the House Speaker recognizes the need, but also “the reality of the votes.”

“It’s anyone’s guess,” she said.

During her talk, Swaim-Staley also noted that there is a role for public-private partnerships, like the one that built new berths and cranes at the Port of Baltimore in anticipation of larger cargo ships that will soon be able to traverse the Panama Canal. But, she said, those partnerships are not without costs and need to be made strategically.

One attendee at the lunch asked Swaim-Staley about funding streetscape programs, like one that was started in Catonsville. The Secretary said the state would be looking at which local programs can be accomplished quickly and which ones may need additional planning or adjustments to meet new regulations.



Chamber President Pam Klahr welcomes attendees. Photo by Micki Bittner, Bittner Photography and Graphics.

“We are taking an inventory of all those types of projects now,” she said.

In response to another question, she told an audience member that local transit, such as commuter buses, has remained a priority with no cuts made in that area. However, more funding will enable the state to address overcrowding and other issues that have arisen.

“The lunch provided an excellent opportunity for Chamber members to hear directly from the Secretary on issues that have a significant impact on the Howard County business community,” said Pam Klahr, the Chamber’s President and CEO.

“Highways, rail lines, public transportation and access to air travel affect the ability of companies to move their goods and their workforce,” she said, “while increases in taxes and fees have a real impact on their bottom line. Businesses need to stay informed about the scope of the issue and the possible solutions on the table.”