



State pulls \$30 million from rail facility project in major victory for community activists

Cargo transfer operation considered critical for growth of port, has been in works but stalled for years

By Kevin Rector, The Baltimore Sun

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State officials have abandoned plans for a rail cargo facility in an economically depressed corner of West Baltimore, amid vocal opposition from residents and diminishing political will.

With the state withdrawing more than \$30 million in funding, the CSX Transportation facility envisioned for the city's Morrell Park neighborhood will not be built, Maryland Transportation Secretary James T. Smith said Thursday.

CSX and the port of Baltimore had been counting on using the facility to help move additional cargo. The port is seeking to be the destination for Asian containers coming through a widening Panama Canal, and the facility would have allowed CSX to move trains with double-stacked containers.

About \$1 million in state funding has already been spent on planning for the project, and Smith said he regrets the state spent so much time on the so-called "intermodal" project — about five years in all. But the community opposition was too fierce to overcome, he said.

"It just wasn't getting the kind of traction in the community it needed," he said. "The political will of elected officials usually doesn't collapse of its own initiative, it usually collapses because the community revolts and says it just doesn't want it. And we were in that position. And rather than simply spin our wheels and get nowhere, we thought, 'OK, let's look at something else.'"

Intermodal facilities allow for trains to be double-stacked for more efficient transport into the rest of the country, often from major coastal port cities like Baltimore. The port of Baltimore has massive cranes moving cargo containers from larger-than-ever ships, but it can't double-stack trains out of its Seagirt Marine Terminal because of height restrictions at the Howard Tunnel.



CSX tracks from the Washington Blvd. bridge in Morrell Park. (Amy Davis, Baltimore Sun / August 5, 2013)

The Morrell Park facility, south of the tunnel, would have been served by about 150 trucks a day delivering containers, a key reason residents opposed the facility. Another reason was that it would have operated 24 hours a day.

Smith said the state would work with CSX and other partners to find alternative ways to bolster the port's ability to attract new business, from offering incentives for carriers to bring cargo through Baltimore to improving the efficiency of port operations and other infrastructure improvements.

James J. White, executive director of the Maryland Port Administration, said in a statement that port officials are "viewing this as an opportunity to regroup and come up with a better alternative."

Community activists in Morrell Park and surrounding neighborhoods, who began organizing against the project more than two years ago, said they feared it would bring few jobs but too much noise, pollution and truck traffic. They cheered the news Thursday.

"We're just sitting here doing our hooray dance, just super excited about the news today, just overjoyed," said Laurie Weishorn, one of the activists who rallied supporters at neighborhood events and testified against the project in Annapolis.

"We're a small community, it's not fancy-pants, nobody's got a lot of money, but we all put our pants on the same way and we all come home at night, and this is where our homes are and that facility didn't belong here."

Weishorn and others spent hours convincing more people of the same, including City Councilman Ed Reisinger and — eventually — Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake.

It was the mayor who first wooed CSX to the city in April 2012 after the railroad failed to build the cargo facility in Howard County, also in part because of community opposition. Then similar outrage grew in Morrell Park.

On Thursday, Rawlings-Blake called the community groups in the area to tell them the deal was off. In a statement, she said she is "open to pursuing opportunities that are conducive to the port's growth," but decided to put the local community first.

"The residents of Morrell Park have made it clear: The proposed CSX Intermodal Facility will be disruptive to their community," Rawlings-Blake said. "I hear them and I am certainly not interested in forcing a project on the community that has not fully considered or responded to their concerns and needs."

Throughout the planning of the project at the Mount Clare rail yard, residents repeatedly complained CSX didn't respond to their concerns.

On Thursday, CSX released a statement saying it "remains committed to leveraging intermodal freight as a competitive advantage" for the port, and is "working toward a solution that will benefit" all parties involved.

CSX said it would continue to work with the state, port and Ports America Chesapeake, which operates some port terminals, on "an approach that maximizes the available resources to strengthen Baltimore's leadership position as a key facility in the U.S. East Coast freight network."

"At the same time we have heard the concerns of residents and businesses in several communities and want to be responsive to the issues raised," the statement said.

The state had agreed to cover more than \$32 million in capital and planning costs for the facility. CSX planned to cover the rest and estimated the total cost at about \$90 million.

Smith said \$31.45 million slated for the project has gone back into the state's Transportation Trust Fund. It could be used to push forward alternative growth measures at the port, but that's not required.

Smith also said the state is now looking to expand studies into replacing the Baltimore & Potomac Tunnel, to consider whether it could accommodate double-stacked trains. But such a construction project would take years to complete.

A couple hours after hearing the Morrell Park project had been quashed, Weishorn was kicking back with a drink at the home of her neighbor and fellow activist Larry Durkin.

"We are toasting this," she said.

"It's terrific for the neighborhood, the community. It can grow and prosper and it's not going to be a heavy industrial site," Durkin said. "There's still a lot of work to do here, but it's still going to be a community."

Another neighbor, Paul DeNoble, said the news was a "huge relief" to him and many others who considered the fight against the project akin to a second job.

"It's been a big burden, a black cloud over our heads," he said. "I've got other problems, but to have that off our chest is huge."

krector@baltsun.com

twitter.com/rectorsun