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Purple Line Emerging as Issue in Race

*Montgomery Executive
Candidates Debate Details*

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Now that Maryland has approved construction of the intercounty connector, the two Democrats vying to replace Montgomery County Executive Douglas M. Duncan have turned their attention to another controversial transportation project: the Purple Line, a proposed light-rail link between Bethesda, Silver Spring and New Carrollton.

The candidates clashed at a debate last week, with County Council member Steven A. Silverman accusing primary opponent Isiah Leggett, a former council member, of flip-flopping on the issue — an accusation Leggett denies. The two also argued about the project's design: Silverman supports a predominantly aboveground system, and Leggett advocates more tunneling to avoid neighborhoods.

With clogged roads and soaring gas prices prompting commuters to seek modes of transportation other than vehicles, the Purple Line is emerging as one of the hottest transportation topics in county politics after years of being overshadowed by the intercounty connector, a highway link between Interstate 270 and Interstate 95. The idea has been around for decades and still faces hur-

See **PURPLE**, C5, Col. 1.

Purple Line Grabs Spotlight in Montgomery

PURPLE, From G1

dium, but many county leaders believe it has found new momentum.

The council resurrected debate Tuesday over the long-stalled project, agreeing to spend \$5 million to design new elevators at the Bethesda Metro station to take passengers the three levels from the train, to a Purple Line platform and then to the street.

"I think it's the ICC of the 2006 election," said Silverman (D-At Large). "If you claim to be for transportation, you can't be hawks on the Purple Line."

County business leaders, who support the Purple Line as a way to spur economic development, are putting pressure on candidates to address the issue. Silverman is calling it his top transportation priority.

Leggett, who opposed an earlier, smaller-scale version of the project, known as the Georgetown Branch Trolley, has said in recent debates and interviews that he, too, supports the Purple Line but has concerns about putting it aboveground in residential areas. "This [line] is definitely identified in the master plan," he said. "I'm going to fight for the master plan and fight to

make sure we execute the master plan."

Cost estimates for the 14-mile rail project vary but go as high as \$2 billion. The project would probably be funded by state and federal dollars, but officials say approval is many years away.

Former Maryland governor Parris N. Glendening (D) once touted a light-rail Purple Line as the best way to improve east-west travel in the close-in Maryland suburbs and was trying to build political support for the project when he left office in 2002.

Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. (R) made the connector his top transportation priority and delayed an environmental study of the light-rail line so the state could consider the feasibility of a rapid bus system instead.

The environmental impact study is scheduled for completion next spring or summer, and the state could take up to a year to decide whether to move forward. Ehrlich has been noncommittal pending completion of the study. The next governor and county executive could play large roles in determining whether, when and how the Purple Line is built.

That's why its supporters say

this year's election is so important.

"Our chamber is ready to be active on a scale we haven't seen in a while," said Michele Horwitz Cornwell, chair of the Greater Bethesda-Chevy Chase Chamber of Commerce. "If they want to be governor, if they want to be county executive, the Purple Line needs to be front and center on their agenda."

A late 2005 poll conducted by the independent research firm Potomac Inc. found that 78 percent of 800 likely Democratic voters support the light-rail version of the Purple Line.

At a Monday night debate sponsored by the Association of Independent Schools of Greater Washington, Silverman pointed to Leggett's opposition to the Georgetown Branch Trolley, which would have run between Bethesda and Silver Spring, and accused him of changing his mind to appease voters. Leggett countered that the two projects are different.

"Don't be confused by what we're talking about now," Leggett told the audience.

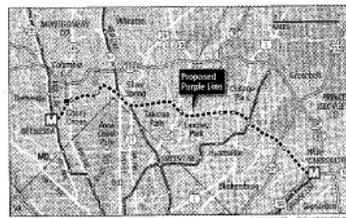
In making transportation and the Purple Line a top priority, Silverman is taking a cue from the man he would like to succeed. Dun-

can coasted to reelection four years ago by shifting the public debate from the need to slow growth to the need to reduce traffic. He backed an "End Gridlock" slate of County Council candidates who championed his transportation initiatives, most prominently the connector.

"The only thing that's going to take cars off Rockville Pike is road and transit investments," said Silverman, who was a member of the slate.

Leggett, although not ruling out the Purple Line, said the Corridor Cities Transitway, a proposed light-rail line between Frederick and Shady Grove along I-270, could be more feasible. "All of those projects will take a long time," he said. "We're talking six or seven years down the line. Those priorities, depending on the funding, could change."

Purple Line opponents say it would disrupt communities and destroy the nearby Capital Crescent Trail. "There are thousands, several hundred people who use the trail each year and to put a train down the middle of it or a bus down the middle of it is ruinous," said Mier Wolf, president of the Greater Bethesda-Chevy Chase Coalition, an anti-Purple Line group.



Although Leggett and Silverman agree that some tunneling might be needed on the eastern part of the route to minimize the impact on neighborhoods between Silver Spring and New Carrollton, they have different views on what should happen on the west side between Bethesda and Silver Spring.

Silverman said it would be more cost-effective to run the light-rail line aboveground on the west, through the town of Chevy Chase and the Columbia Country Club. Leggett said he would consider residents' request for tunneling in some areas.

Republican candidate Charles R. Floyd supports a heavy-rail underground version.

Some detractors say the candidates are wasting their time debating such minutiae when construction is many years away. If it happens at all.

"Silverman claims it's his first priority. Sure," said Isaac Hantman, a board member of the Greater Bethesda-Chevy Chase Coalition. "Can he guarantee it's going to be funded? No."

The more important player, many observers say, will be the next governor.

Spokesmen for Duncan and Baltimore Mayor Martin O'Malley, his opponent for the Democratic nomination to challenge Ehrlich for governor, said they support the Purple Line.