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***Suburban Gentrification: Change, Stasis, and
TOD along Maryland's Purple Line***

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Abstract

The Washington Metropolitan area has been growing rapidly and experiencing gentrification since the 1980s. Contemporaneously, a light rail corridor in the inner suburbs was planned and is currently being constructed. This light rail, Maryland's Purple Line, travels through dense urban areas, post-war era suburbs, and through a series of low-income immigrant gateway neighborhoods. Through a case study of the planning and lived experience of residents along the Purple Line's alignment, this paper examines the costs and benefits of the modern paradigm of TOD. The potential benefits of the line may be imbalanced against its costs in the short run, especially with respect to housing stability and affordability, displacement, and neighborhood change. In the long run, economic efficiency and growth catalyzed by this public investment may shift the societal balance toward a net positive, but measuring this will be challenging. The tenuous political coalitions that support construction of light rail retrofitted into auto-oriented places will have to adjust to be more inclusive of equity, vulnerable populations, and provision of affordable housing.

Introduction

For decades, planners in North American metropolitan areas have advanced the construction of light rail systems as a more viable, cost-effective alternative to further investment in heavy rail. In the 1980s, these systems were seen as a less expensive, and more easily constructed way to carry more people than bus transit, provide higher quality service, relieve highway congestion, and focus urban growth (Cervero 1984). These factors, coupled with a lack of political support for more expensive heavy rail, resulted in a significant expansion of systems, new lines, and extensions. From 1978¹ to 2022, 30 cities or metropolitan areas have built over 100 unique light rail lines. Just under half of those have opened since 2010 and a further 24 are currently under construction, all with estimated completion dates by 2030 (The Transit Explorer Database, 2023). Dozens more are in the planning process or in early proposal stages.

These systems have in aggregate cost tens of billions of dollars and have had dynamic impacts on their home regions. Their myriad effects on the built environment and travel patterns have spawned entire subfields of academic research on ridership, land use and transit-oriented development (TOD), gentrification, sustainability, housing and land prices, and more. In the Washington, DC metropolitan area, a shifting coalition of political support succeeded, despite numerous setbacks, in approving and funding the currently under-construction Purple Line. The Purple Line is the DC area's first addition of light rail, due to open in 2027 in the Maryland suburbs. The Purple Line Corridor², or the area roughly one mile around the line, has become a

¹ The Edmonton ETS Capital Line opened in 1978, and it was the first light rail system to open in the post-war era in North America (The Transit Explorer Database, 2023).

² From this point, the Purple Line Corridor will be referred to as "the Corridor" in most places.

local flashpoint in political battles over provision of affordable housing, gentrification, displacement, densification, and economic growth.

Residents in the Corridor were already dealing with 21st century challenges of urban growth and change in this rapidly growing, and gentrifying, metropolitan area. Change has been accelerated by the heavy public investment in the Purple Line, and speculative action in the real estate market is already causing higher home and rent prices (Peng and Knaap, 2023, Peng et al. 2023). As residents avoid obstacles of long delayed and much maligned construction, they also must confront neighborhood change, avoid risks to housing stability, and comprehend the complex politics of TOD and transit investment. Through participatory action and qualitative research, this paper addresses the following research questions: how do residents in a potentially gentrifying neighborhood understand this investment in the context of gentrification and displacement, and how is it affecting them, and how do they think it will change their neighborhood?

These questions are of critical importance as political and societal attention has turned increasingly towards equity. Questions over real estate development, provision of transit, and more have been increasingly linked to housing stability and the ongoing debate over housing supply, making the nexus of planning issues around transit and land use a focal point for these equity debates. Construction of light rail transit has, with some conflicting evidence and heavy dependence on neighborhood context, been linked to gentrification of adjacent neighborhoods (Chava and Renne, 2021; Baker and Lee 2019; Nilsson and Delmelle, 2018). Gentrification is the influx of new investment and new residents with higher incomes and educational attainment into a neighborhood (Chapple and Loukaitou-Sideris, 2019). While the consequences of gentrification remain persistently debated, there is a growing body of evidence that displacement, a possible consequence of gentrification, can have deleterious effects on the well-being of people who are displaced (Dawkins, 2023; Brown-Saracino, 2017). On the other hand, some work has found that low-income individuals are no more likely to be displaced than peers elsewhere if they live near transit neighborhoods, and that transit stations do not necessarily worsen income segregation (Delmelle and Nilsson, 2020; Nilsson and Delmelle 2020). This article explores these issues through qualitative means in a rapidly changing place in order to add important local context to the ongoing macro-scale debate over gentrification and displacement.

This paper is organized as follows. In the first section, there is a critical review of literature on the effects of light rail construction on cities via transit use, equity, real estate costs, and smart growth. The second section presents geographic and historical context for the Washington metropolitan area, the Purple Line itself, and the Long Branch neighborhood in Montgomery County, which was the focus of qualitative research for this article. The next section describes the qualitative methodology, and the following section synthesizes results from the qualitative data. The results are placed in context with the literature review in the penultimate section through discussion. The final section concludes and offers directions for further research.

Literature Review

Light rail transit has become the dominant mode of new investment in public transit in North America. Its role as a potential driver of land use change is an oft-cited justification for its construction (Higgins et al., 2014). While investment in light rail transit may assist cities in reaching climate goals, promote sustainable travel, and revitalize underutilized urban areas, these improvements and catalyzation of land use change can come at a cost. Echoing the mistakes of planners in past generations, investment in public transportation in the modern context may transform the cultural identity of neighborhoods and force disadvantaged residents to move elsewhere (Chapple and Loukaitou-Sideris, 2019).

Mounting evidence over the past several decades has made it clear that with the right conditions, light rail can have significant impacts on nearby land values, driving up commercial and residential property prices and rents (Tehrani et al. 2019). These effects can be anticipatory, with values increasing as soon as station locations have been announced (Knaap, Ding and Hopkins, 2001). In the Purple Line Corridor, recent research has found that these anticipation effects are already measurable for single family homes, and more uniquely, for multifamily rents (Peng and Knaap 2023, Peng et al. 2023). Rents in apartment buildings near stations are rising faster than apartments further away, which is unusual because rents are typically only adjusted based on available amenities, not future amenities. This burdens low-income tenants who have few other transit-accessible choices and who likely face high moving costs. The Washington metropolitan area has been growing extensively, which is a necessary pre-condition for these land use changes and new development near urban rail stations (Huang, 1996).

Evidence on the secondary economic and social impacts of light rail is murkier. Ferbrache and Knowles (2017) note that while light rail systems may be advertised and justified with their ability to bridge social divides, provide economic development, and connect disadvantaged areas, their practical effects can continue to reproduce social inequalities. Here, the focus is on several concepts that have been identified in the literature as it pertains to light rail: transit-induced gentrification, and the residential and commercial displacement that may result from that gentrification. Dawkins and Moeckel (2016) united these concepts by simply defining transit-induced gentrification as displacement of low-income populations likely to benefit from transit access to due the capitalization effects of increased accessibility stemming from new transit. In a review, Delmelle (2021) discusses the state of research on impacts to residential mobility and neighborhood change. Several studies have tested the theory that low-income residents will move out of transit neighborhoods at higher rates and broadly found that low-income residents are no more likely to move than their peers elsewhere. These studies (and others in the broader gentrification literature outside of the transit context) have seemingly confirmed, with quantitative datasets, that gentrification does not drive displacement of existing residents at disproportionate rates compared to what would be expected elsewhere.

Exclusionary displacement, due to gentrification, is when a household is not able to move into a dwelling that it previously could have afforded due to affordability issues or other causes (Marcuse, 1985). There has been less research on the extent of exclusionary displacement as a result of investment in transit, though Delmelle (2021) acknowledges that transit may serve as an

accelerator for exclusionary displacement. While some studies have found that social class shifts upward and home prices increase near new transit stations – potential indicators of exclusionary displacement – others have found little evidence of gentrification (Chava and Renne, 2021; Baker and Lee, 2019). Overall, it appears that generalizations of neighborhood change or gentrification across whole rail alignments are challenging, and intra-regional market conditions near specific stations may be better determinants of such changes.

Delmelle (2021) notes a dearth of qualitative studies on the impacts of new transit on local residents and calls for further research on the topic. In the Purple Line Corridor, the community of Langley Park has received attention for its nexus of planning problems and for active political resistance to neighborhood change (Lung-Amam et al. 2019). Suspicions of heavy public investment in transit that exist there amongst the largely disadvantaged Latinx immigrant communities and are shared in other locations, like Denver, Oakland, San Diego and Los Angeles (Sandoval, 2021; Jackson and Buckman, 2020). Along the Purple Line’s path in Prince George’s County, many low-income residents are skeptical they will be able to benefit from the line, are disappointed with the route it takes, and believe it will benefit outsiders (Wu and Roberts, 2022).

The literature on light rail’s effects on cities via gentrification and displacement is still relatively new. This article responds to Delmelle’s (2021) call for further qualitative research by providing resident perspectives on the addition of light rail transit to an established neighborhood. This will be accomplished through a narrowing of focus to one particular part of the sixteen-mile-long Purple Line Corridor: the Long Branch neighborhood.

Geographic Context: The Washington Metropolitan Area, The Purple Line, and Long Branch

How did the Purple Line arrive on the scene?

The Washington DC metropolitan area was, for many years, an exception to the trend of increasing investment in light rail. Being one of only a few major American metropolitan areas to invest in a wholly new heavy rail subway system in the post-war era, light rail was largely ignored as a need or viable transit option³. As recently as the early 2000s, the original Metrorail system was still being expanded along its originally designed spokes into the suburbs with the completion of the green and extension of the blue line further into Maryland⁴. Until the late 2010s, no investments to light rail in the Washington Metropolitan area had been made, except for a short and low-capacity streetcar line within the city of Washington itself.

Maryland’s Purple Line changed the region’s heavy-rail paradigm. This dual-track light rail line due to open in 2027 is being funded and built through a public-private partnership. The route has been conceptually planned in its current form since the 1990s and runs entirely in the Maryland

³ Analogous and contemporaneous heavy rail rapid transit systems to the DC area’s Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) Metrorail include Atlanta’s MARTA, San Francisco’s BART, and Miami’s Metrorail. All were planned and initially constructed in the 1970s and 1980s.

⁴ A multi-decade planning and construction process culminated in 2022 with the addition of a new radial line into Northern Virginia, with the major purpose of accessing Dulles International Airport. This line was included in the region’s original 1968 plan as an extension, but was not completed until more than 50 years later.

counties of Montgomery and Prince George’s. These counties, which surround Washington DC to the north, east, and southeast, are home to approximately two million people, making them home to roughly a third of the metropolitan population (US Census Bureau, 2023). While these counties grew by leaps and bounds during the freeway-catalyzed early post-war suburban and later 1980s-early 2000s exurban expansions, they are also home to a network of dense urban subcenters. To the eyes of most, mixed use subcenters within these counties—Bethesda, Silver Spring, Langley Park, and New Carrollton—would themselves be considered cities.

These urban areas, with the notable exception of Langley Park, have grown extensively along Metrorail’s Red, Green, and Orange lines, which provided fixed nodes of dedicated rapid transit matched by coordinated planning of dense land uses to capture growth in the office and residential markets. These dense activity centers have no fixed transit between them from east to west, limiting inter-suburban connectivity to buses and automobiles. Enterprising planners and activists had long noted the potential for a direct, separated transit connection between Bethesda and Silver Spring along a decommissioned branch freight railroad right of way (ROW). This ROW was purchased by Montgomery County in the late 1980s with a future use for public transit envisioned⁵.

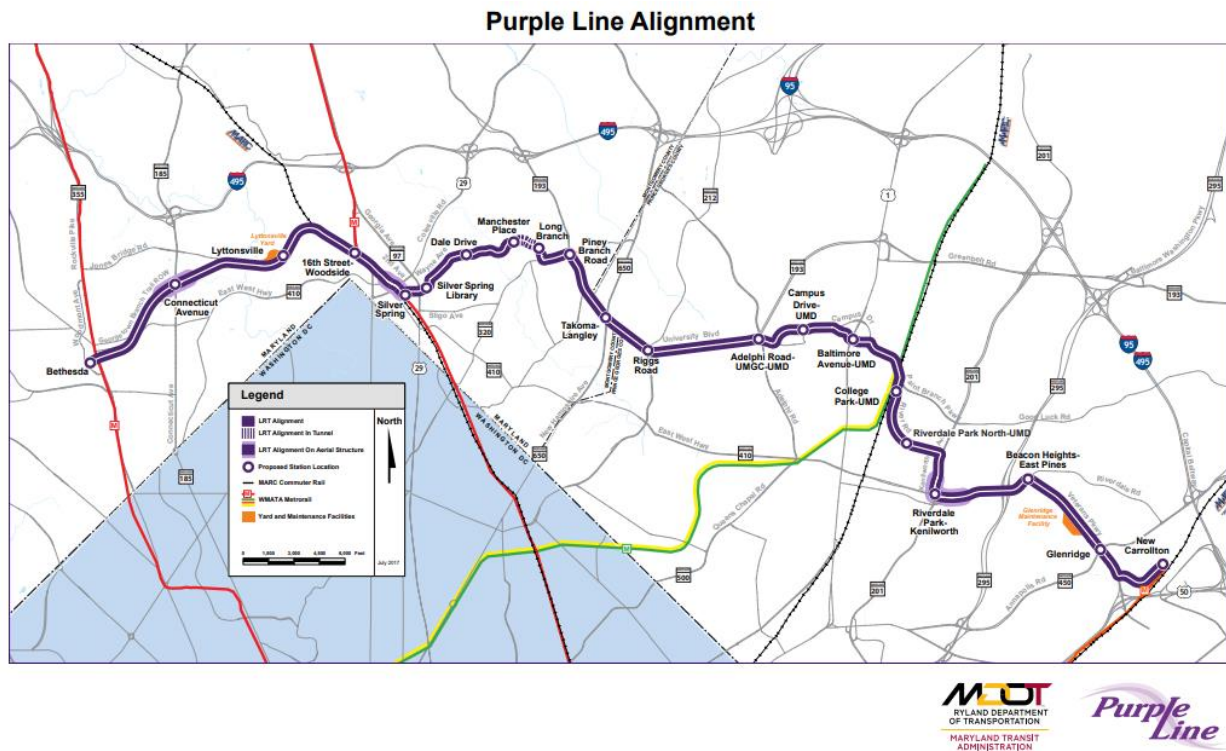


Figure 1: the Alignment of the Purple Line. Note the Long Branch Station in eastern Montgomery County.

⁵ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1988/12/09/rail-spur-purchase-priceless/4eb46847-4cb9-420c-b65e-b4a706a9ebdc/>

As regional frustration with traffic reached a breaking point in the late 1990s and early 2000s, smart growth planning, with a focus on transit and concentration of land use and density, became the paradigm in Maryland. East-west traffic on the I-495 beltway has little in the way of alternatives, and transportation plans in this era considered alternative options for fixed transit that would serve projected dramatic growth in commuting along that path. These early efforts took nearly twenty years to coalesce, as it was not until Governor Martin O'Malley committed capital funding for design and environmental impact studies after his election in 2006 that the line's planning began in earnest (Action Committee for Transit, 2023).

After federal approvals and preliminary engineering were completed, it seemed that the Purple Line was ready to proceed in 2014. A republican governor's unexpected election that year, however, brought uncertainty to the project. Cost-cutting negotiations took months, but the new governor Larry Hogan eventually approved the project. Groundbreaking on the project officially occurred several years later in 2017, after further delays due to lawsuits from nearby landowners. In the intervening years, construction proceeded, but was beset by further delays between 2020 and 2022 as the lead contractors on the project sued the state over cost and timeline conflicts, and eventually walked away. While work began with a new management team in 2022, the estimated completion date is now projected to be 2027, which would mark ten years of construction, and a delay of five years past initial projected completion dates (Murillo, 2023).

Light rail in the suburbs

The Purple Line's path carries it through a number of suburban neighborhoods circumferential to the region's urban core. In eastern Montgomery County, three stations will serve the unincorporated area unofficially known as "Long Branch." These stations serve a densely populated residential and commercial area that follows several secondary and arterial roads, as illustrated in the map below. The community is eponymously named from a small local creek which runs north to south bifurcating the area, itself a tributary to a tributary of the Anacostia River, which meets the much larger Potomac to the south in Washington, DC. This area, and neighboring Langley Park to the east, was the logical path for the Purple Line to traverse from the urban core of Silver Spring eastward to the campus of the University of Maryland, College Park. This part of the region, including Long Branch, sits roughly along a regional divide between prosperity to the west, and disadvantage to the east (Bookings Institution, 1999).



Figure 2. Long Branch Context Map

The census tracts that compose Long Branch are part of the Census Designated Place of Silver Spring, which is an unincorporated part of Montgomery County. Population densities in this area are around 10,000 people per square mile, with variation locally based on the composition, placement, and densities of residential buildings. Thus, Long Branch, nominally a suburb, has a population density that rivals that of many cities. This density springs from numerous garden-style and small high-rise apartment buildings, which have unit densities around 50 per acre. While most of the area is restricted to residential zoning, the central part of the neighborhood at the intersection of Flower Avenue and Piney Branch Road is zoned for mixed use and has extensive commercial activity, including grocery stores, restaurants, and numerous other services. Between these apartments and commercial areas which are oriented on the major roads, there are dozens of acres of residential streets with single family homes on lots ranging from 1/10th to 1/4th acre in size.

The Purple Line will cross the heart of Long Branch, connecting wealthier communities to the west to more impoverished communities to the east. Two stations – one at the heart of Long Branch at Arliss St. and one on Piney Branch Road – are potentially future nodes of TOD style growth, given permissive zoning on nearby, currently lower-density commercial lots. While development at a large scale has not come to Long Branch for decades, just a mile or two to the

east in downtown Silver Spring, significant densification of similar low-density parcels has occurred.

Long Branch – a changing place

The demographic and economic composition of the neighborhoods around the three future Purple Line stations in Long Branch has shifted considerably since the 1980s. In those years, older inner-ring suburbs like Long Branch were eclipsed in preferability by newer homes on larger lots in new suburbs to the north, so home prices in the 1960s through early 1990s were relatively stagnant and rents were cheap. As the Washington DC region experienced a long economic boom, and affordable and proximate land for new suburbs was chewed up by the march of sprawl, inner suburbs regained favorability (Rowlands, 2019). This is especially true for transit-accessible inner suburbs like Silver Spring and its neighborhoods like Long Branch, which have high-quality public schools, proximity to public transportation to access the region’s core, quick access to highways for automobile travel, and a family-friendly housing stock. In the table below, this increased desirability can be noticed via the increases in median income, home prices, and the share of the population with a bachelor’s degree. Like many inner suburban areas in the US, Long Branch has seen essentially no housing construction since the 1980s, but its population has steadily increased, primarily due to immigration and an influx of larger families.

	Population	% non hispanic white	Share Foreign Born	Share BA+	Share HS or less	Share in Poverty	Median Household Income	Housing Units	Median Home Value	Median Rent
1970	25,787	81.4%	10.6%	12.6%	32.8%	7.0%	\$70,320	9,391	\$163,966	\$889
1980	24,207	60.4%	21.0%	21.0%	29.9%	10.8%	\$59,652	10,133	\$232,434	\$779
1990	26,418	41.5%	34.6%	25.3%	24.1%	10.6%	\$70,960	10,532	\$308,016	\$1,146
2000	28,650	29.5%	41.9%	25.3%	25.6%	12.1%	\$72,421	10,492	\$243,726	\$973
2008-2012	29,633	27.1%	45.1%	25.5%	27.5%	13.0%	\$76,648	10,524	\$413,206	\$1,175
2015-2019	30,097	26.3%	43.1%	25.8%	26.1%	15.8%	\$76,772	10,401	\$433,657	\$1,324

Note: the 1970 full count census did not account for Hispanic populations, thus the non-Hispanic white figure may include Hispanic populations for that year. Cash values are inflation adjusted to 2019 dollars, using BLS CPI. Source: Brown University Longitudinal Tract Database analysis of 1970-2000 full count and sample data decennial censuses, and 2008-2012 and 2015-2019 ACS Data.

Also notable in that table, running counter to the narrative of increased desirability for middle-income residents, is the escalating percentage of residents who are foreign born. Such agglomerations of immigrants are not uncommon locally, as roughly 40% of the entire suburban population in the DC metro area lives in immigrant suburbs⁶ like Long Branch (Hanlon et al. 2006). Long Branch is adjacent to and less than a mile from Langley Park, a recognized immigrant gateway into the Washington Metropolitan area, particularly for immigrants from Central America (Price et al. 2004). While Long Branch has lower poverty rates than Langley Park, its built environment, demographics and social context are similar, as it is positioned proximate to this major center for the region’s Latino community (Lung-Amam and Dawkins, 2019). Accordingly, local challenges with crime, poor quality housing, and public health are much the same in these two areas. This is reflected in the increasing share of residents who live

⁶ Places where at least 25% of the population is foreign born.

below the poverty line in Long Branch, which has more than doubled since 1970. Immigrant neighborhoods like these are becoming more common in the US metropolitan context, and they typically have lower educational attainment, lower median incomes, a lower white population, and a greater share of Hispanic residents than other neighborhoods (Wei and Knox, 2014).

One critical difference between Langley Park and Long Branch is the border between the counties: Montgomery County is well known for having more public amenities, better safety net resources and higher performing schools than Prince George's. All these factors push rent and housing costs higher. Despite escalating poverty levels and a dramatically increasing share of the population that is nonwhite, median home prices have drastically increased in real terms since 2000, and rents are much higher as well.

Long Branch Today, and Tomorrow

Since construction on the Purple Line began in 2017, life in Long Branch has been disrupted. Easy access to the shopping areas at the center of the neighborhood became restricted, some neighborhood streets became closed to all but local resident traffic, arterial roads have had lanes shifted and blocked with ebbs and flows of construction, sidewalks are inaccessible, and the din of construction noise continues. Further, in this unique part of the alignment, the Purple Line enters a short tunnel east of the Manchester Place station to reduce a steep grade between two creek valleys before exiting near the Arliss station. The blasting for this tunnel construction, and associated noise and vibrations, became a source of conflict between the State and local residents (Lewis, 2018). By 2023, construction was ongoing after years of delays and no track was visible on the surface of the arterial roads on which the train will travel. Amidst this daily grind, a broader set of issues is playing out.

While areas to the west along the Purple Line like Chevy Chase and Silver Spring have seen extensive new multifamily and mixed-use construction, the construction in Long Branch is related only to the train. The speculative nature of the notion that development will come to the area has not, however, stopped the area from becoming a political flashpoint over transit induced gentrification. Montgomery County's Executive, Marc Elrich, the de facto mayor for much of the County's unincorporated area including Long Branch, placed himself in the thick of this debate over housing supply and displacement. At a candidate forum prior in 2017 to his election, Mr. Elrich recalled his days on the County Council, when he opposed the actions of the County's land use and zoning authority (Park and Planning):

“When we did the Long Branch plan, and Park and Planning came in and said we want to rezone all the existing housing in Long Branch, I accused the Planning Board of ethnic cleansing. And I said some people do it with the gun, you guys are doing it with the pen but the truth is those folks would be gone and they would be gone forever. (Tallman, 2017).”

Mr. Elrich was referring to the 2013 Long Branch Sector Plan, a comprehensive plan for the area immediately surrounding two of the Long Branch Purple Line stations, and he equated transit-induced gentrification and displacement of lower-income, immigrant residents of Long Branch with ethnic cleansing. This plan was one of the first land use governing sector plans to be

completed along the Purple Line's alignment after its approval became more politically guaranteed. Accordingly, during the planning process for the Long Branch Sector Plan planners considered increasing the zoned density and liberalizing allowed uses on the parcels of many large garden apartment complexes, which rented at market-rate affordable levels. The goal was to increase density around the future stations, increasing the potential success of the Purple Line. A successful set of interest groups, arguing against potential displacement of primarily Latinx residents, lobbied the planning board and County Council to block this re-zoning of existing residential use and limited conversion to higher density mixed use zoning to commercial parcels. A member of the planning board⁷ at the time who was in favor of rezoning most of the multifamily parcels recalled that the County Council bought into a commonly held theory that market rate development would drive displacement (C. Anderson, personal communication, 2023). There was contention over this argument as those in favor of upzoning argued that the current housing stock was poorly maintained, and restricting housing supply by holding zoning constant in an increasingly desirable neighborhood could aggravate gentrification and displacement in the long run. The passed plan states "the Purple Line could impact real estate values and drive up prices. To prevent the loss of market affordable units and potential displacement of lower-income residents, the Plan recommends retaining the zoning on most of the existing multifamily developments" (Montgomery County Planning Department, 2013, p. 20).

While this compromise signaled a desire to promote housing stability for current residents by restricting future development, it does not prevent the sale, remodel, and or turnover of existing structures or units at higher prices. The same plan stated it will "reconfirm existing single-family residential zones in established single-family neighborhoods to maintain a varied residential character," locking single family zoning in place (Montgomery County Planning Department, 2013, p. 34). At the time, discussion of liberalization of single-family zoning to allow denser uses was not on the table (C. Anderson, personal communication, 2023). The long run effects of these decisions are impossible to evaluate, for several reasons, including current political debate over housing policy.

The COVID-19 pandemic turned up the volume on these issues in the years after the plan was passed and Marc Elrich was elected. The affordability of rent became a major political issue, and post-pandemic the Council began to consider rent control laws which could impact all older buildings in communities like Long Branch. Simultaneously, various political actors in the County have been studying or recommending liberalization of single-family zoning, which could supersede plans like the one in Long Branch (Montgomery Planning, 2021). These issues are continuously debated, including at a public rent control forum in Long Branch in 2023 where residents and advocates stressed that hundreds of affordable housing units could be lost in redevelopment processes without greater protections (CHEER, 2023).

The plight of neighborhoods like Long Branch is visible to a broad group of actors called the Purple Line Corridor Coalition (PLCC) which has focused attention on the neighborhood for

⁷ Which makes land use recommendations for approval to the County Council, which must approve them through majority votes.

some time. This Coalition, anchored at the nearby University of Maryland, College Park, works to build a more equitable transit corridor across four goal areas: housing, small business, workforce, and placemaking (Purple Line Corridor Coalition, 2019). One affordable housing organization that is part of the PLCC is already working to renovate an existing apartment complex and build more units on the lot, all with income restricted rents. This property is located just east of the Piney Branch road station (Martin, 2021).

Given these ongoing debates and actions, many local residents are aware of this context of conflict surrounding the Purple Line. They and their elected leaders may be conflicted over whether the Purple Line will be good or bad on the whole; but it will undoubtedly bring change. The residents themselves must negotiate the difficulties of construction, changes to housing markets, and their doubts or fears about the future. In the next section, the methodology for further qualitative analysis of these issues is explained.

Methodology

Empirical research for this article was primarily qualitative, with the main source being focus groups. Information used to contextualize the focus groups included primary source knowledge from the author's years as a participant and observer in the Purple Line's planning process, review of primary and secondary documents related to urban planning in the Corridor, and analysis of data gathered from personal communication. The author has been engaged in the activities of the PLCC for a decade as a researcher developing reports, applying for grants, and working with stakeholders. Focus groups to discuss displacement and the Purple Line were conducted in the spring of 2023 in Long Branch. The focus groups were conducted with the support of a local nonprofit, Community Health and Empowerment through Education and Research (CHEER).

The first focus group included ten people, the second seven, and the third twelve, for a total of 29 unique participants. The author observed and took notes while a facilitator, a volunteer with CHEER, moderated the focus group sessions. The second focus group was conducted in Spanish with a native Spanish speaking facilitator and native Spanish speaking participants. Each session took roughly 90 minutes and was audio recorded with a smart phone. These audio transcripts were digitally transcribed using otter.ai transcription software, and then manually corrected by graduate students who cross-referenced the audio against the computer-generated transcripts. These complete, corrected transcripts were coded and analyzed using the NVivo software package.

Focus group participants were asked questions organized into three broad categories. In the first category, focused on the present day, participants were asked about their awareness of the Purple Line project, what people are saying about the project, their feelings on the project, and the impacts of construction. In the second section, which focused on gentrification, displacement and housing costs, participants were asked about their current perspectives on gentrification, difficulties with housing costs as renters or owners, if they felt they needed to move, and where they would go if they had to leave. In the final section, which focused on neighborhood change and the future, participants were asked more broadly about how the neighborhood of Long

Branch is changing: are the businesses different, are new people moving in who are different in some way, are certain people leaving; they were also asked how they think the Purple Line will change the area.

Results

Residents in Long Branch across the economic spectrum are aware of the unique context in which they live. While it's made perhaps more noticeable by the Purple Line construction, those who have been in the neighborhood for a longer period of time have seen significant change in the Washington metropolitan area and are beginning to notice it in their own neighborhood.

Construction and the line itself

Across strata of gender, income, age, and tenure, residents of Long Branch are frustrated with the slow, nuisance generating progress of construction. While some residents expressed tolerance for this current burden, as they looked forward to eventual service, they were in the minority. Residents are particularly frustrated with the condition of surface streets, which have been repeatedly torn apart and reconstructed for utility relocation and road widening, with no improvements for pedestrians or train tracks yet visible. Several residents noted they've paid more to repair their cars – including replacing tires – since construction began, blaming difficulties on poorly maintained roads. Others were aggravated by blocked access to sidewalks and shopping centers. The quagmire of delays that befell the project beginning in 2020 is particularly frustrating for these residents, as they saw construction sites sit idle, with streetcorners, empty lots, and pieces of the neighborhood in tatters.

More interestingly, more than 5 years into the construction process, many residents are unaware of the exact details of how the Purple Line will function. The line, except for the small tunnel, will travel at grade on surface streets. Perhaps due to the designation as “the Purple Line” – a color, just like Metrorail lines – many residents seemed to assume the Purple Line would travel wholly underground. Others assumed it would go into Washington directly, like all the other metro lines, and were unaware of the general east to west route of the line. When asked whether or not they would use the line, responses varied. Most indicated that they may use it for short trips or to replace bus travel, but many residents noted it would not replace car trips for shopping or commuting.

Gentrification

Asked to define or relate what gentrification means to them, many residents turned toward local examples. The bulk of residents in the focus groups had little to say about gentrification, instead preferring to talk about current issues in their neighborhoods rather than abstractly discussing gentrification. In multiple instances in separate focus groups, however, some residents brought up gentrification and neighborhood change that has occurred in neighborhoods of northwest Washington DC, like U Street, Adams Morgan, Columbia Heights, and Petworth. These neighborhoods have become dramatically more expensive since the 1980s, and since have lost a large part of their diverse populations and culture, though retained affordable subsidized housing (Howell, 2016).

One young, white male resident described himself as “a poster child for gentrification” who has moved between gentrifying areas of the DC region, before ending up in Long Branch. He feared that what he had seen happen in other neighborhoods, in terms of cost escalation, would happen in his new home. Another resident related the Mt. Pleasant uprisings of 1991 to what could potentially happen along the Purple Line. As a resident of that area at that time, he witnessed the explosion of tension that occurred after a police officer shot a young Salvadoran immigrant, leading to days of unrest (Scallen, 2020). The resident connected this unrest to over-policing, rooted in cultural differences between white gentrifiers suspicious of recent immigrants. This resident feared that the Purple Line could catalyze similar cultural displacement and conflict between white gentrifiers and a new wave of immigrants in his current neighborhood in Long Branch. Others related to gentrification via the commercial side, fearing loss of neighborhood businesses and replacement with national chains like Starbucks. A few residents declared that gentrification was already happening, or already happened, specifically in reference to escalating home price and rental costs.

Housing costs

While discussion of gentrification was comparatively sparse, residents were eager to share their experiences and worries over housing costs. This was particularly true for renters, though homeowners had their own separate concerns. Renters uniformly noted that their rent costs had been escalating in recent years, and particularly since the pandemic. Others noted that in addition to rent costs rising, landlords were suddenly charging more for parking, laundry, and other amenities. In a few cases, tenants expressed dismay with the state of their apartments, and indicated that landlords were reluctant or unable to make basic quality of life repairs to their units. Some renters noted that while utilities were previously included in rent, they were now being charged separately for those, increasing total housing costs.

Several individuals of retirement age expressed a mix of dismay and satisfaction with the escalation in single family home prices, in separate focus groups. All agreed that they would be unable to qualify to afford a home in the neighborhood today if they ignored their homeownership equity gains. Others discussed that the types of professionals they knew bought homes in the area twenty years ago or more are no longer be able to do so: teachers, public servants, blue collar workers. These prior types of home have been replaced by a more professional class with higher incomes. Participant homeowners acknowledged their personal gain in terms of real estate asset prices but noted their frustration with a lack of other homeownership options besides single family homes. If they wanted to stay in the area, downsizing was not an affordable option. A few noted the mismatch between their status as retired couples, or singles, in large homes; when they knew young immigrant families in the neighborhood were crowded into smaller apartments.

Displacement

Residents were asked directly about potential displacement. When asked where they would go if they had to move due to increased housing costs, renters had several immediate reactions. A Latinx resident said he would relocate further out in the metropolitan area, to Laurel, a growing

exurban community between Washington and Baltimore. Others said they would move in with family, or potentially relocate to an entirely different state where housing costs were lower. Homeowners indicated they did not expect to have to move, but noted they were locked in their current house due to dramatic increases in housing prices, and steep current interest rates. Homeowners also noted increases in property taxes due to rising assessed values.

Renters and homeowners agreed on their preference to stay within Montgomery County if possible. Those with children expressed that they felt the schools were of a much higher quality versus neighboring Prince George's County. People of all ages said that Montgomery County offered better amenities and services for residents. All feared that escalating costs could push them to Prince George's County, which they viewed more negatively outside of more affordable housing costs.

Though exclusionary displacement was not mentioned directly, the discussion of schools and housing prices was set within this framework. Residents uniformly like the neighborhood and want to stay but are concerned they won't be able to afford it in the future. One older Black resident discussed her fears and perspective as a long-term renter in the Washington DC region. "As a serial renter...since the 70s, I've never really wanted the best place I could afford [meaning the most expensive, nicest apartment in the nicest building], but the best community I could help develop. And I see that being less and less possible for people who are current renters... There's just no way to be able to stay here." Her comments sparked a general discussion about the cost of rent, with many older residents expressing statements like "I just don't know how y'all do it" in reference to younger people affording high monthly rent prices.

Neighborhood change and the future of Long Branch

Residents had varied perspectives on changes they'd seen in the neighborhood, and what the Purple Line could mean for the future. These concerns were broadly divided into two camps, both focused on in-movement of higher income residents: residential change, and commercial change. There was immediate agreement, with no dissent, that the Purple Line would serve as a catalyst for these changes. Some noted positively that the Purple Line would bring more foot traffic to businesses, and thus the area could support more or different retail. It was implied that this would provide more retail options for local residents, which could be a good thing. Others noted it would increase land values, changing the commercial and residential rent market as both people and businesses would want to locate proximate to transit.

Many participants in the focus groups were relative newcomers and thus had not seen much change in the community. Older homeowners or long-time tenants noted that the single-family homes were starting to turn over to a more professional class of young homeowners, though they had not yet completely. Some anecdotally noted that Latinx homeowners were being replaced by white homeowners. Some Latinx residents who had been in the area for a while noted that they saw fewer "Americans" in the commercial areas and ascribed that difference to recent crime increases. Others feared that the presence of transit would bring crime and vagrancy.

Most agreed that Long Branch has not yet seen any form of commercial gentrification, like what has occurred along H St NE in Washington DC or other nearby neighborhoods like downtown

Silver Spring. Some noted that there has been change or turnover in small businesses, but what's currently present in the commercial strip malls caters to a lower-income services market. Nearly all present agreed that new development could push out existing mom-and-pop style businesses and favored local establishments like a major grocery store. This was seen as a potential loss, despite some expressing dissatisfaction with the loss of stores years ago, which had since been replaced with more down-market options.

Discussion

While the academy debates the scope and impact of transit induced gentrification, the process behind it is already deeply ingrained in the conventional wisdom in the Washington metropolitan area. Decades of growth around transit-based activity centers radiating out from the region's core have shown residents – both new and long term – that change can happen fast in such places. The residents who participated in focus groups are aware that this change may come to their community, and they are wary of displacement. Income sorting near the future Purple Line may already be occurring, and residents implicitly understand that this may accelerate once the line opens. These experiences inform the answer to the first research question about how residents understand the transit project vis a viz gentrification and displacement. Residents believe that the Purple Line will be a catalyst for gentrification, which they view both positively and negatively. Most feared displacement for themselves or others, with housing tenure being determining the degree of concern.

Their lived experience and opinions appear to illuminate a contradiction between the modeled income segregation near new transit deemed possible to occur by Dawkins and Moeckel (2016), and the lack of empirical evidence for such segregation and displacement in similar places (Delmelle and Nilsson, 2020; Nilsson and Delmelle 2020). This contradiction could be rooted in differing perceptions of change over time, or special conditions in specific neighborhoods in Washington that have biased collective opinion toward the inevitability of transit induced gentrification.

The opinions of residents are further informed by political energy and activism around housing affordability and stability. More than a decade ago, the Montgomery County Council decided to restrict potential growth by holding zoning constant in certain multifamily parcels near the Long Branch stations, in response to pressure from concerned residents and interest groups. These groups feared that upzoning existing market-rate affordable housing complexes would trigger development and displacement. Their actions limited potential development capacity around the stations. In doing so, political leadership chose to limit housing supply in an increasingly desirable place, limiting capacity to absorb growth.

Housing costs were the primary focus with respect to the second research question on the effects of the Purple Line, with concerns about construction being secondary. All residents were concerned about current and future housing prices and how the Purple Line could change the cost of housing in the neighborhood. Practical concerns at present focused on the difficulties that a massive construction project brings to a small, and previously quiet corner of a suburban area. The final research question took these concerns into the future, asking residents how they

thought the Purple Line would change. Here, the primary focus was again on housing and development – residents figured that the Purple Line would eventually attract new commercial and residential development. This was viewed as an amenity for a higher income class, and not for current residents.

While Long Branch has yet to attract new multifamily and commercial development, escalations in single family home prices and multifamily rents indicate that premiums are already being paid for proximity to the Purple Line (Peng and Knaap, 2023). These quantitative observations are matched by census data and the experiences residents shared in the focus groups. Such escalations in home prices, coupled with relatively stagnant median household incomes, can be a leading indicator of imminent gentrification as homebuyers are expecting future value increases (bunten, Preis and Aron-Dine, 2023). While empirical evidence and theory suggest that increasing housing supply can moderate housing price increases, Montgomery County has already chosen its path in Long Branch, a not uncommon decision based on ‘supply skepticism’ (Been, Gould-Ellen and O’Regan, 2019, p. 25). Despite this choice, land use plans are not permanent and could be altered in future plans or on a site-by-site basis. Modification to potential housing supply in Long Branch could also happen through other means, like revision of single-family zoning laws across the county or within certain radii of transit stations.

The actions of the council were not without merit. They heard the concerns, echoed years later in the focus groups, wherein renters (and homeowners to a lesser extent) were deeply worried about being unable to afford their neighborhoods and future access to the Purple Line. A feeling permeated across the focus groups, especially from lower income renters, that the change the Purple Line would bring amenity would not be designed for them. This belief was specifically held in reference to the generation of new residential and commercial space near stations as a result of land value increase. Having to move away would mean loss of schools, amenities, social networks, and home. Limited in their ability to preserve affordable housing due to financial constraints, the Council overruled a pro-growth element in a long-range plan and instead signaled prioritizing preservation of existing affordable housing. In the ensuing years since the plan passed the Elrich administration and County Council increased the size of the housing trust fund and have used the County’s right of first refusal on apartment complex transactions to arrange affordable housing preservation deals. Despite verbal, financial, and policy commitments to increasing the stock of affordable housing, much of the housing stock in Long Branch remains market-rate and does not have affordability covenants. This leaves the long-term stability of renters in Long Branch in limbo.

Conclusion

This paper, through qualitative analysis, sought to answer several research questions about the effects of transit investment on neighborhood residents. First, how do residents in this potentially gentrifying neighborhood understand the Purple Line in the context of gentrification and displacement? Intriguingly, residents of all walks of life appear to easily place their neighborhood’s context into the context of transit-induced gentrification, seeing their neighborhood has a mirror image of similar places in the region that have gentrified. The story,

as it were, is the same everywhere: a lower cost place that is diverse and low income receives a significant public investment, the neighborhood receives more private investment in response, and eventually, many higher income people move in and incumbent low income residents can no longer afford it. Some residents of Long Branch believe this is already happening due to the construction, others that it has already happened, and some that it will happen soon or after the train has opened. None seemed to believe that the Purple Line would make their neighborhood a less desirable place that would receive less investment, aside from a few general concerns about increased crime near stations.

The other two research questions dealt with opinions on the current, personalized effects of the project and the potential broader changes coming to the neighborhood. It's clear that residents are not well informed about the operation of the line or its construction process, but they can hardly be blamed due to years of delays, lawsuits, and construction. Residents are somewhat eager to use the line but have lost confidence in the delivery of the project due to constant interruptions and delays via construction. They are realistic about whether it will replace primarily car-oriented commuting or personal trips, with an assumption that it will not. Residents believe they are already paying higher rent and home prices because of the Purple Line coming, and they believe these will continue to go up. Residents are concerned that businesses they patronize and like are at risk of displacement. In short, residents are wary of transit-induced gentrification and understand that they are in a place which may be vulnerable to it.

This study had several limitations. Participants were relatively representative of area demographics and tenure, with roughly half being homeowners. Only 29 participants were engaged, which may not have captured the full range of opinion in an area with many thousands of residents. More importantly, residents were recruited via contact lists through past participation in events or awareness of a local nonprofit, making them more likely to be politically opinionated and engaged. Last, the author of this article has been a resident of the area for more than a decade and is writing from the perspective of a participant observer, via the PLCC, in local politics and policymaking. Future qualitative work should focus on several things, split into two categories. First, it will prove valuable to contextualize the changes observed by long term residents over time, including the experiences of renters, and patterns of relocation and movement into and out of the neighborhood. Second, the experiences of small business owners, particularly minority business owners, were not covered here, though one bodega owner was present in one of the focus groups. Either of these categories could be addressed through qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods means.

For planners, this qualitative evidence should bolster the growing consensus that the time to plan for affordable housing is well before large public investments. The same is true for protecting local small businesses. Larger questions on the politics of supply skepticism versus yes-in-my-backyard policy were not answered by this study, though anecdotal evidence gathered here suggests that increases in housing supply and choice are desirable for local residents. Residents expressed classic skepticism of luxury style housing while bemoaning a lack of housing options between expensive single-family homes and lower quality garden apartments.

For local politicians and policymakers seeking to find the solutions to blowback over transit induced gentrification, answers will be hard to find. One clear key solution is the unfortunately de rigueur planning response of the need to bridge the gap between transit planning and housing and economic development planning. Increased coordination and advanced planning for equity issues like displacement prior to transit construction, however, will not bring additional resources for affordable housing to the table without serious political commitments and complex tradeoffs. If the experience of the Purple Line is any indication, these problems will continue to make transit investment more complex and challenging.

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