

Proposed Baltimore-D.C. maglev bad for region's natural resources | COMMENTARY

By GEOFFREY L. HASKETT

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A couple walks across a bridge at the Patuxent Research Refuge in Laurel on Wednesday, Dec. 6, 2017. (Jen Rynda / BSMG)

The proposed Super-Conducting Magnetic Levitation railway is a very bad idea for all of our natural resources. Instead of handing over the last remaining federally conserved land between Washington, D.C., and Baltimore to a private corporation, we should be focusing on restoring and building on our natural areas, which provide wildlife habitat, clean water and lands for hiking, hunting and wildlife watching.

Nestled directly off the Baltimore-Washington Parkway halfway between D.C. and Baltimore is one of the most valuable protected homes for wildlife, plants, fish and their habitats — the Patuxent Research Refuge, which is part of the larger National Wildlife Refuge System. The 10 million people who live and

work in the D.C. to Baltimore corridor enjoy recreational opportunities at Patuxent, including hiking, bird watching, photography, fishing, hunting and environmental education. This land is teeming with life: migratory birds, dragonflies, butterflies, bees, fish, mussels, bats, turtles and amphibians, with many listed as state or federally endangered or threatened.

The Draft Environmental Impact Statement has proposed multiple routes, with no indication of which one is preferred, to confuse the public and avoid a full evaluation of the impacts to natural resources throughout the ecosystem. Degradation of Patuxent and the surrounding lands would occur not only from the rail bed, but also underground tunnels, tunnel exits, air shafts, emergency exits, maintenance yards, parking lots and roads. The proposal specifically targets the refuge with bringing the train above ground when it hits refuge lands. Each time the train passes, 24 hours a day, there will be a loud boom as the train goes from underground to above ground.

Our concerns about this project grow every day. There is no longer any other large natural area in our region. With the train literally planned on Patuxent's Western boundary, we anticipate significant habitat fragmentation, which would damage high quality interior forest and sensitive terrestrial or aquatic communities. Threats to water quality in the Little Patuxent River and the Patuxent River during and after construction would impact multiple species. The loss of ecosystem services such as groundwater recharge, surface water protection and carbon storage are of importance not only to wildlife, but humans as well.

Beyond the direct damage to this wildlife refuge, we strongly oppose transferring federally protected lands to a private corporation. Surrounding privately held lands would be taken by eminent domain and condemnation. Although the project currently targets only the D.C. to Baltimore corridor, the

intent is to run the train all the way up to Boston, impacting multiple natural areas in its path. We are looking at a mass transfer of privately and federally owned lands into corporate hands from D.C. to New England.

We continue to fight for public lands that are under constant threat as we face enormous challenges to creating a sustainable future. We can no longer mitigate the erosion of ecosystem services in highly developed areas such as the D.C. to Baltimore corridor. We need these lands not only for nature and people, but also for future generations who depend on us to make the right decisions. There is already a significant footprint from the current railroad system. Fix it, manage it, but don't walk away and set into motion a significantly destructive, untested technology for a promise of a shorter commute for a small segment of society.

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