

Crime on Maryland Mass Transit Administration Light Rail Line: Myth or Reality?

Bernard Foster and Ronald Freeland, *Maryland Mass Transit Administration*

In 1992 the Maryland Mass Transit Administration (MTA) introduced a barrier-free light rail system that traveled through a variety of neighborhoods. Many of these neighborhoods are located just outside Baltimore City, but they were isolated and had not experienced the urban crime problems that are part of everyday life in the city. Soon after the Central Light Rail Line (CLRL) became operational, these isolated neighborhoods began to experience an increase in crime. It appeared inevitable that the CLRL would be blamed for the increase in crime, since the CLRL was the only significant change in decades for several of these neighborhoods. The crime situation grew worse, and community residents moved into action. At this point, there was only sketchy and incomplete evidence to support the notion that CLRL was transporting crime to the suburbs, but the public perceived that the crime existed, so for all intents and purposes, the increase in crime did exist. The MTA moved quickly to rescue the CLRL and to convince the public that it was a safe and efficient mode of transportation. The MTA used a variety of techniques to regain the public confidence, including public relations, increased policy enforcement, and a creative community outreach program. The MTA restored public confidence, the communities along the CLRL have been supportive, and ridership on the CLRL continues to grow.

Former Maryland Governor William Donald Schaefer had a dream. He envisioned a modern, state-of-the-art, well-equipped light rail system that would stimulate economic development in central Maryland and enhance the revitalization of the Baltimore metropolitan area. Governor Schaefer's vision began to take shape when mass transit planners designed a light rail system that linked Baltimore City with nearby Baltimore and Anne Arundel counties.

The final project design and construction of Phase 1 of the Mass Transit Administration's (MTA's) Central Light Rail Line (CLRL) produced a 22.5-mi, 24-station rail system that originates in northern Baltimore County, traverses the historic Jones Fall River mill area, cuts through the heart of the Baltimore City central business district, and continues in a southerly direction into densely populated, moderately commercial and industrial areas of Anne Arundel County. The \$364 million CLRL, which was completely funded by the state of Maryland, opened in two sections. The first section opened in April 1992 and provided light rail service from Timonium in northern Baltimore County to Camden Yards, the home of the Baltimore Orioles, located in downtown Baltimore. The southern leg of Phase 1 of CLRL opened in June 1993; it extends south to Glen Burnie in Anne Arundel County.

After investigating operating models in other cities with light rail systems, MTA officials decided that CLRL would be a barrier-free, proof-of-payment system. In effect, CLRL was designed to be an honor system; frequent inspections would enforce the payment of fares. The honor system would later become a source of controversy, since many observers believed that a number of passengers were riding the system for free.

When it became fully operational, Phase 1 of the CLRL served a variety of diverse communities, some rich, others poor, and still others that were in the middle tier of the social and economic fabric of Baltimore metro area. Many citizens who lived in upscale communities believed that the new CLRL would hurt their property values, bring strange and unwelcome people to their neighborhoods, and deliver urban crime to their doorsteps. Some citizens did not believe that the CLRL met their transportation needs and, in several cases, strong and unified community organizations prevented light rail stations from being constructed in their neighborhoods.

EARLY EXPERIENCE WITH CLRL

Despite the early public criticism of the CLRL, the project's understated budget, and the lack of widespread community support, early experiences with CLRL were encouraging. Ridership along the CLRL developed very rapidly. In fact, by autumn 1994, a comprehensive survey revealed that approximately 20,000 passengers a day were using the system. Moreover, CLRL had already proved that it was an ideal mode of transportation for delivering large numbers of patrons to downtown events such as Baltimore Orioles' major league baseball games, art festivals, and concerts. For example, a three-car train with one operator could carry as many as 600 people to and from an Orioles game. Indeed, the CLRL proved to be a very efficient way of moving large numbers of people.

Notwithstanding the efficiency of CLRL and its early popularity, signs of trouble were beginning to appear. Given the fact that the CLRL connected communities and citizens that otherwise did not come into contact with one another, it was predictable that some social, economic, and ethnic tensions would arise. Indeed, there were early signs of discomfort in certain communities along the CLRL when citizens of these communities came to realize that CLRL provided easy access to unfamiliar people.

In the opinion of most observers, the early success of the CLRL far outweighed the less onerous trade-offs of unfamiliar faces and infrequent incidents of shoplifting in stores near light rail stations. All was well with CLRL, and the future looked bright.

BUILDUP

Almost as if it were on some planned course of its own, crime, or the perception of crime, began to arise along the CLRL. By March 1994, CLRL patrons, community leaders, merchants, and MTA officials were concerned about the CLRL service's being linked to criminal misconduct. Much of the concern centered on complaints from the business community adjacent to the CLRL service.

MTA officials sounded an internal alert. Few merchants increased the level of security at their establishments, but they demanded more protection from local and MTA police. Some community organizations moved into high gear; these organizations held public meetings and formed committees to study the problem and make recommendations. Politicians with constituents along the CLRL monitored the events and planned their 1994 campaign strategies. Thus, the stage was set for a public debate over the perception of crime along the CLRL.

EVIDENCE OF CRIMINALS ALONG SYSTEM

By early spring 1994, there was evidence to suggest that the criminal element might be riding the rails in search of new markets. Merchants routinely reported that shoplifting was increasing at an alarming rate; in fact, shoplifting reportedly increased by 237 percent in one shopping center in northern Baltimore County, according to county police.

Citizens in certain communities began to report the disappearance of personal property such as bicycles and lawn equipment. One citizen proclaimed, "I've had things stolen off my front porch."

Citizens in these communities expressed outrage, because they were not accustomed to locking up their personal property. These citizens believed that their neighborhoods were free of crime, so they did not see a need to secure their personal belongings.

In late April 1994, a watershed event occurred on the CLRL. At approximately 10:00 one Saturday morning, a 24-year-old woman was stabbed in the chest as she waited for a light rail train. The woman was not fatally injured, but this event, combined with the recent reports from community groups, left the impression that crime was escalating. Emotions were running high. It no longer mattered whether crime along the CLRL was a myth or reality. People believed that crime was rampant, and various citizens groups were calling for swift corrective action.

PUBLIC AND COMMUNITY REACTION

Fearful of the potential hazard to their loved ones and their property, certain groups began to weigh in on the

issues of crime and violence. Indeed, many people believed the Baltimore metro area was experiencing a mini crime wave along the CLRL. These citizens decided it was time to act.

Communities affected by the increase in crime began to hold regular public meetings. Moreover, community associations began to develop plans designed to reduce the level of crime in their neighborhoods. At least two community associations recommended closing the CLRL stations in their communities. One community formed its own neighborhood watch team. Other suggestions included adding conductors to trains, eliminating the CLRL honor system, increasing the presence of police, fencing the system, and caning the culprits.

The cauldron was boiling. Efforts to deal with the perceived crime problem were fragmented, the personal security of citizens and their property was at stake, and a \$364 million investment in CLRL was at risk. These conditions called for the MTA to assume the leadership in coordinating efforts to reduce crime and in dispelling the notion that it was dangerous to ride the CLRL.

ROLE OF MEDIA

The media chronicled with great interest the public debate over crime on the CLRL. Sensational and eye-catching headlines were the order of the day. An August 15, 1994, *U.S. News & World Report* dateline read "Lock the House, Here Comes the Train." On May 22, 1994, a Baltimore newspaper, *The Sun*, carried the headline "Light Rail Carries the Public's Worries."

During the period between March and July 1994, no fewer than 60 newspaper articles and editorials referred to crime on the CLRL. There were also many television and radio reports during this period.

MTA RESPONSE

The MTA began to move into action at the first signs of trouble along the CLRL. Even in the midst of emotional outcries from the communities and the intense media coverage, MTA management calmly and objectively went about the business of defining the problem and designing a solution.

MTA management knew that actual crime, or the perception of crime, along the CLRL could hurt ridership; worse yet, the issue of crime threatened the very future of the CLRL. Whether crime was occurring in communities along the CLRL no longer mattered; the important thing was that the public perceived crime to be a major problem.

During internal meetings, the management team decided to adopt a proactive approach to combatting

crime on the CLRL. The MTA police were appointed to be the lead agency, and the chief of police, Bernard Foster, was designated as the lead spokesperson for MTA. The Offices of Transit Communications and Customer Services mounted a positive and straightforward campaign to convince the public that MTA cared and would take every means necessary to fight crime on the CLRL. In short, the MTA management team attended community meetings, talked to the media, discussed the problem with patrons, and did everything possible to assure the public that CLRL was not a dangerous, crime-ridden system.

In a March 21, 1994, editorial in the evening edition of *The Sun*, MTA Administrator John A. Agro, Jr., informed the public that customer safety was the highest MTA priority. Mr. Agro also laid out a four-part program designed to increase security on the CLRL. The program consisted of increased police presence, an undercover initiative, improved visibility of security devices already built into the CLRL system, and a community outreach program.

As part of the program, the MTA police increased its presence on the CLRL. The MTA police also attended community meetings in an effort to help citizens understand actions that MTA had taken to combat crime on the CLRL. At one such meeting, when he was asked about crime on CLRL, Chief Foster said, "Light rail is being used by people with bad intentions just like they use taxis and other forms of transportation."

In addition to increasing its presence on CLRL and attending community association meetings, the MTA police department also started a hotline and offered a cash reward of up to \$1,000 for information leading to the arrest of persons who had committed crime along the CLRL. The hotline was intended to demonstrate MTA's commitment to this issue and to involve the general public in the apprehension, arrest, and conviction of criminals.

COOPERATION WITH OTHER POLICE DEPARTMENTS

Chief Foster recognized that he could not maintain indefinitely the increased presence of MTA officers on the CLRL, because the MTA police were also responsible for providing security for the buses, subway, and commuter rail systems operated by MTA. Chief Foster, however, was convinced that the increased presence of uniformed police officers would help to deter crime on CLRL. Since he was not able to maintain this presence with his own police staffing, he negotiated agreements and created a task force with four other police departments that permitted officers of these departments to patrol CLRL stops and ride trains. These police departments had an interest in helping MTA, since they

shared the responsibility of patrolling the jurisdictions where the reported increased crime was occurring.

The agreements with the other police departments proved to be very successful, which reassured CLRL communities and patrons and allowed Chief Foster to deploy his officers to ride trains and perform fare inspections. When Chief Foster's program was fully operational, uniformed officers were assigned to almost every CLRL station, and officers were riding every train. The result: after an initial flurry of police activity and arrests, fewer crimes were reported by community residents and CLRL patrons.

UNIQUE COMMUNITY OUTREACH PROGRAM

The "Together Project" was a unique community outreach program the MTA used in the fight against CLRL crime. The project identified youths who lived in one or more of the 18 communities along the CLRL; it brought these young people together to perform various jobs on the CLRL, such as helping customers, planting flowers, and cutting grass. The Together Project encouraged this diverse group of youths to learn to work with one another and to be tolerant of differences in other people. This project was immensely successful and had the added benefit of bringing together the parents from the various communities served by CLRL.

CONCLUSION

Today, incidents of reported crime are down by 93 percent throughout the entire CLRL system. Although this

fact is undisputed, some communities are still having difficulty adjusting to the cultural diversity brought by a system such as CLRL.

The police task force concept has been the main force behind the reduced crime and general acceptance of the CLRL system by community residents and businesses, where opposition previously existed. The strong uniformed presence of task force participants sent a clear message that the MTA would not allow the CLRL system to be used as a conduit for criminal misconduct.

Another benefit of the task force has been the internal growth of the MTA police force to eventually assume the positions and duties of the task force members. Likewise, cameras at CLRL stations and on every CLRL car are being installed to provide greater coverage of the system while continuing the search for ways to place security personnel in more proactive roles.

Finally, reported crime figures before and after the formulation of the community outreach program, security task force, and regularly scheduled community meetings show a sharp contrast. Obviously, increased criminal activity in residential and business communities adjacent to the CLRL was a reality.

Historically, there have always been those who are not timid about availing themselves of the fruits of someone else's labor. In the MTA's case, the same type of individuals used the CLRL service to reach locations that had been inaccessible heretofore.

It was inevitable that once all the concerned groups organized and began to work together, the problem of increased criminal activity would be systematically eliminated.