

**Opening Statement of John B. Catoe, Jr.  
before the Subcommittee on Housing, Transportation,  
and Community Development  
of the U.S. Senate Banking Committee  
December 10, 2009**

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Vitter, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I am John Catoe, General Manager of the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, known as WMATA, or Metro.

Let me begin by reiterating a point I made when I testified here in August. Like many transit agencies, Metro needs to expand our system's capacity to meet future ridership growth. But, like other agencies, we are struggling even to maintain what we have in a state of good repair, because funding has not kept pace with the capital needs of our aging system. If not addressed, I believe this combination of increasing transit demand, aging infrastructure, and inadequate funding will combine to form a "perfect storm" that will eventually undermine transit's success.

I reiterate this point today because safety and state-of-good-repair are two sides of the same coin. The ability of transit agencies to continue providing safe and reliable service depends on our ability to maintain our systems in a state of good repair. I encourage the Subcommittee to keep this in mind as you consider ways to improve safety at our nation's transit systems.

Before I talk about oversight, let me tell you about some of the things we are doing at Metro to improve safety. We continue to respond to the June 22 accident in several ways, including operating trains manually, and developing software to alert us to track circuit problems on a real-time basis. We have also undertaken a number of other safety initiatives, including more work-site inspections, stricter hiring standards, and tougher disciplinary actions for safety violations such as cell phone use while operating a Metro vehicle.

Our internal efforts to ensure Metrorail's safety are overseen by the Tri-State Oversight Committee – known as the TOC. I think it is fair to say that Metro, TOC, and the witnesses here today all share the same basic goal: effective oversight that results in a safe environment for transit riders and employees. To meet that goal, I believe the federal government should take a more active role to ensure consistency and quality of oversight across the country.

In particular, I believe that effective oversight should include five key elements. First, an oversight agency must have full-time, trained and experienced staff, and sufficient funding to attract and retain them. Let me also note that it is equally important for the transit agency itself to have sufficient resources--including staffing and training--for its internal safety programs.

The second element of effective oversight of subway systems like Metro is a “system safety” focus, by which I mean that the oversight agency would not develop standards relating to individual components such as rail cars, without considering how all of the components of the subway system work together to ensure safe operation.

Third, I strongly endorse the involvement of industry experts in the development of any safety standards. Transit professionals know our technical requirements and operating conditions best because we live it every day.

Fourth, effective oversight requires meaningful enforcement authority. I encourage you to consider ways of ensuring compliance other than fines or withholding of funds, which would further reduce our already limited funding.

Finally, I believe that the use of cost/benefit analysis for safety requirements would stimulate the development of realistic, workable solutions to safety issues. It is important to understand that almost every element of a subway system has a potential impact on safety. If transit agencies have to “rob Peter to pay Paul” and defer needed capital investments to address new safety requirements, there is the potential to create new safety issues.

Let me conclude by saying that we at Metro take our responsibility for providing safe and reliable transportation very seriously, and we would welcome additional oversight, accompanied by additional funding, to help us achieve that goal. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.