

Riders' Advisory Council
September 7, 2011

I. Call to Order:

Mr. DeBernardo called the September 2011 meeting of the Riders' Advisory Council to order at 6:33 p.m.

The following members were present:

Frank DeBernardo, Chair, Prince George's County
David Alpert, D.C. Vice Chair, District of Columbia
Penny Everline, Virginia Vice Chair, Arlington County
Chris Farrell, Maryland Vice Chair, Montgomery County
Kelsi Bracmort, District of Columbia
Jamie Bresner, City of Alexandria
Stephen Clermont, Fairfax County
Sharon Conn, Prince George's County
Patricia Daniels, District of Columbia
Dharm Guruswamy, At-Large
Joseph Kitchen, Prince George's County
Lorraine Silva, Arlington County
Deborah Titus, Fairfax County
Carol Carter Walker, District of Columbia
Ron Whiting, Montgomery County
Victoria Wilder, Montgomery County

II. Public Comment Period:

There were no comments from members of the public.

III. Approval of Agenda:

Without objection, the agenda was approved as presented.

IV. Report by Public Safety Committee:

Ms. Wilder reminded members about the upcoming public meeting with Metro Transit Police Chief Michael Taborn tentatively scheduled for September 21st. She said that she would circulate the agenda to members again. Mr. Kitchen added that the hope is that while the conversation will focus on larger public safety issues, there will be a more specific focus on safety issues associated with student behavior on Metro.

Ms. Silva asked if there would be discussion of safety issues related to malfunctioning equipment at this meeting. Ms. Wilder said that the meeting would not address those issues, but that it would be focused on the police and public safety issues.

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Ms. Titus asked whether the Transit Police would address the issue of hearing-impaired students' safety on Metro. Ms. Wilder asked Mr. Pasek to mention this to the police so they could include that information in their presentation.

Ms. Walker asked if anyone from the Metropolitan Police Department would be at the meeting and how the Transit Police works with the MPD and D.C. Public Schools to address youth behavior issues. Mr. Kitchen explained that the Transit Police are in regular communication with the MPD and the schools. Mr. Pasek added that there is someone in the Transit Police who acts as a liaison with the public schools on student behavior issues, though he was unsure if that individual would be at the meeting on the 21st.

Mr. DeBernardo suggested that Council members help publicize these meeting among their own personal networks once the date is finalized.

V. Metrobus Service Considerations:

Jim Hamre, the director of Metro's Office of Bus Planning provided an overview of proposed changes that Metro is planning to take to public hearing later in the fall. He explained that these proposed changes were designed to improve Metrobus service to address crowding and on-time performance issues on several routes as well as to react to changes in development patterns and trip patterns. Mr. Hamre said that this would be accomplished by shifting some service from routes that are underused. He said that this would be done by removing certain early/late trips with very low ridership, expanding headways on routes that would not create overcrowding, eliminating trips or portions of routes where riders would have other travel options and by discontinuing some routes that do not meet Metro's operating criteria. He explained that the overall package of service adjustments would have no net impact on Metro's budget and is expected to increase ridership.

Mr. Hamre then reviewed the specific changes with members of the Council as well as the proposed schedule for Board action, public hearings and a final decision by the Board. He added that, if approved, service changes would be implemented in December 2011, March 2012 or June 2012.

Mr. DeBernardo then opened the floor to questions from members of the Council.

Ms. Walker asked why some changes required hearings and other changes did not. Mr. Hamre explained that Metro has very specific thresholds in terms of what changes require a public hearing, which relate specifically to changes in span of service, the geographic area covered by a route and the amount of service provided by a route.

Mr. Kitchen asked about the details of the hearings and whether they would be held in locations near the affected bus routes. Mr. Hamre said that hearing locations were still being finalized but that Metro does try to ensure that hearings are held in locations as close as possible to where service changes are taking place.

Ms. Silva asked whether, in looking at changes to the 23A route, Metro ever considered splitting the route into two separate routes. Mr. Hamre said that Metro had done an in-depth study of the 23A line last year as part of its Service Evaluation Studies and is making changes recommended by that study. He noted that

the construction in the Tysons Corner area that has caused so many issues with this line's on-time performance is only temporary, so Metro is making changes to accommodate the impacts of that construction.

Mr. Guruswamy said that it would be helpful to see the dollar savings or expenditures associated with each proposed route change. Mr. Hamre said that Metro specifically didn't include dollar figures because it was trying to separate budget discussions from service discussions.

Ms. Titus asked whether there were changes to jurisdictional bus services considered as part of these proposals. Mr. Hamre responded that these proposals are focused on Metrobus service but in looking at upcoming budgets, there may be proposals to better align local and Metrobus services to achieve savings.

Dr. Bracmort asked that Metro provide before/after maps of the proposed service changes. Mr. Hamre noted that the public hearing docket would include these maps. Dr. Bracmort also asked if there were any changes proposed to the NH-1 National Harbor route. Mr. Hamre said that Prince George's County hadn't asked Metro to make any changes to the NH-1 route, so no changes are proposed at this time.

Dr. Conn noted her concerns about the lack of bus service from the Branch Avenue Metro and in the Camp Springs area of Prince George's County. Mr. Hamre noted that major changes weren't considered as part of this round of proposed changes. He explained that the Prince George's County Planning Department is looking at larger-scale transportation changes for the County.

Ms. Daniels asked how Metro will give notice of these hearings. Mr. Hamre responded that Metro would run ads in various newspapers, post notices on buses and put notices at key bus stops. He also said that he expected that notice of the hearings would be spread by word-of-mouth.

Mr. Farrell asked whether the Department of Defense was making any money available for RideOn or Metrobus service as part of Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) changes. Mr. Hamre said that the Defense Department made some funding available for changes to Metrobus and DASH routes to serve the Mark Center development, but that was a unique case. He explained that Fairfax County paid for additional service to Fort Belvoir and Arlington County paid for additional service to Arlington Hall. He added that most additional riders coming to the Medical Center in Bethesda are expected to arrive by rail, so the focus isn't on making bus service improvements.

Ms. Everline asked whether Metrobus worked with MetroAccess as it developed the list of proposed changes to ensure that there wouldn't be any unintended consequences of these changes that would increase MetroAccess ridership, such as removing service to senior centers. Mr. Hamre said that staff had reviewed the changes to ensure that they would not result in an increase in MetroAccess rider.

Ms. Everline also suggested that Metro provide comment cards on bus routes where changes are proposed to allow riders another way to comment on the proposed changes. Mr. Hamre explained that because buses are often shuffled between routes, it would be difficult to ensure the cards were assigned to buses on specific routes.

Mr. DeBernardo noted that sometimes routes that appear to duplicative are useful to riders in that they result in shorter headways along shared segments and save riders time. He asked whether Metro taken into account the reduced headways that riders would encounter when proposing route changes and eliminations and whether Metro has minimum headways for routes. Mr. Hamre said that there are minimum headways that vary by jurisdiction – 60 minutes in Prince George’s County, 30 minutes in Montgomery County, for example. He added that in the District of Columbia headways are generally demand-driven. He said that Metro does try to coordinate headways along common route segments when scheduling buses.

Mr. Alpert said that Metro expects to gain bus ridership without an increase in MetroAccess ridership, and asked whether Metro would measure any changes in ridership as a result of these proposed route changes. Mr. Hamre noted that following route changes made last year in the Greenbelt area, staff developed a process to measure changes in ridership. He said that he would be willing to work with MetroAccess staff to track any changes in MetroAccess ridership that might result from these proposed changes, should they be implemented.

Dr. Conn asked why there was such a disparity in on-time performance rates between different jurisdictions. Mr. Hamre explained that there are more often events in the city that disrupt traffic – such as presidential motorcades or other special events. He added that many route schedules have already been adjusted to help on-time performance and gave examples of changes made to the 28A and 28X in Virginia and the D12, 13, 14 in Maryland.

Mr. DeBernardo thanked Mr. Hamre for attending the meeting and answering questions. The Council then took a brief recess.

VI. Follow-Up on RAC Procedures Discussion:

After the meeting reconvened Mr. DeBernardo provided an update to the previous meeting’s discussion of enacting a procedure by which Council members would request information from Metro staff. He explained that, upon further discussion, the development of a procedure was deemed to be unnecessarily cumbersome and, therefore, he and other members of the executive committee recommended against developing such a procedure.

VII. Meetings with Board Members:

Mr. Pasek noted that meetings between Board members and Council members from Maryland and the District of Columbia had been tentatively scheduled for the morning of September 22nd, prior to the Board’s Safety and Security Committee meeting. He said that he would send confirmation to members from those jurisdictions shortly.

VIII. Riders’ Council Recruitment:

Mr. Pasek provided members with a timeline of the recruitment for new members of the Riders’ Council for Fall 2011. He said that those members whose terms were expiring at the end of the year would be receiving information on how to apply for reappointment.

IX. Questions/Comments on RAC Chair Report:

Mr. DeBernardo then opened the floor for questions on his Council Chair report. Mr. Kitchen explained his participation as a representative of the Riders' Council in the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments' (COG) Regional Equity Caucus grant application. He explained that COG was applying for a grant from the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development to do outreach to underrepresented communities as part of the regional planning process and that COG was partnering with community groups, including the Riders' Council, in this grant application.

X. Open Mic:

Mr. DeBernardo then opened the floor to comments from members.

Ms. Walker discussed the recent news that Metro would be hiring contractors to help maintain its escalators. She said that she had mixed feelings about this development – as a rider she welcomed any change that would improve Metro's escalator performance, while as a labor advocate she said that she had concerns about Metro outsourcing its work. She suggested that this may be an item for a future Council meeting agenda.

Ms. Wilder asked whether Metro's Chief Safety Officer, Jim Dougherty had ever come to speak with the Council. She suggested this as a possible future agenda item.

Mr. Farrell noted that the Action Committee for Transit is having an upcoming event in Takoma Park and said that he would send out additional information to Council members via email.

Dr. Bracmort suggested that Metro develop a program to get more direct feedback from its riders, such as by placing people at bus transfer points or other locations to ask riders about their experiences. Mr. Alpert suggested that it may be a good idea to further discuss and refine this idea at a committee meeting.

Dr. Conn noted that she was glad to see that Metro had come up with a plan for the Martin Luther King Memorial dedication, even though the event was ultimately cancelled because of the weather. She also noted her concerns about the lack of signage at the L'Enfant Plaza station to direct users to the elevators.

In response to Ms. Walker's comment, Mr. Guruswamy noted that Metro doesn't pay great wages to its escalator mechanics, meaning that many escalator repair technicians who are trained by Metro ultimately leave for better-paying jobs after their training is completed. He also noted, in response to Dr. Conn's comment about signage that adding signs could be an architectural issue, as it would change the look of Metro stations.

Mr. Guruswamy added that there are no long-term plans for Metro system expansion beyond the Dulles extension, and said that it would be good for the Council to explore this topic.

Mr. Kitchen asked whether Metro had a community relations department and suggested that they come to a future Council meeting to discuss their role at Metro.

Mr. Clermont suggested that Metro's escalator statistics don't provide a full measure of escalator availability, noting that the statistics don't separate out availability of escalators at major transfer points and the impact that has on customers.

Ms. Walker noted an experience she had at the Brookland station and explained that there is only one accessible entrance at that station. She suggested that Metro install a call button or something to allow customers to alert the station manager when the escalator isn't working, as he or she can't see that from the station manager's booth.

XII. Adjournment:

Without objection, Mr. DeBernardo adjourned the meeting at 8:31 p.m.