



**“The Washington Metro System:
Safety, Service and Stability”**

**Testimony of
Peter Benjamin
Chairman, Board of Directors
Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority**

**Before the
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform**

**April 21, 2010
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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Issa, and Members of the Committee, my name is Peter Benjamin, and I am honored to appear before you today as the Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (Metro). I would like to speak first about the role of Metro in the Washington metropolitan area. I will then address three priorities of the Metro Board: improving safety, addressing our current significant financial challenges, which relates directly to enhancing our operational reliability, and coordinating a management transition at the agency.

Let me begin by saying: Metro's job is not to run buses and trains. It is to move people, to connect origins and destinations, to create transportation alternatives for the region, and to support the operations of the federal government. It is to get people to work, to school, to the Rayburn building, or to the Zoo. Most of the people who ride Metrobus and Metrorail are not dependent upon transit. They own cars. They will ride Metro only if it is safe, clean, reliable, and comfortable at a reasonable price. To attract these riders Metro must have a customer focus. We need to make it simpler to use the system. We need to provide more and better information to our riders when

there are delays or other problems on the system.

At the same time, we need to improve our communication with our riders so that they have a better understanding of Metro's limitations. We have a 34-year old rail system, which is not like it used to be when it was new. It has old rail cars, track bed, power equipment, and communications systems. More than half of our bus garages are over 50 years old and some buses are 15 years old. As the equipment and facilities age they become less reliable, break down more often, and need more maintenance. We will have more service disruptions and delays than when the system was new, and we need to ensure that our customers are informed and prepared for that reality.

Of course, above everything else we must provide safe and reliable service, and in the past year we have had accidents which have shocked and saddened all of us. We need to focus on three goals: 1) build a new safety culture throughout the organization, from the general manager to the bus and rail operators, mechanics, and track walkers; 2) invest in the equipment, facilities, and personnel needed to enhance safety, and 3) create the policies and procedures that enhance system safety. In doing so effectively, we will restore public confidence in the safety and quality of our service and rebuild trust among policymakers, legislators, and other stakeholders. I know that these goals will not be achieved overnight. We are doing everything we can to move Metro toward these goals.

Safety

I believe that we need to change how we handle safety at Metro. Certainly safety involves making sure we replace equipment and rehabilitate facilities so that they do not slip into disrepair. Safety involves introducing better technology. Safety involves establishing the right procedures and making sure that people follow them. Safety involves training, and retraining. Safety involves signage and communication. But most important, safety involves people: establishing a culture of safety and an attitude of attention to safety. Nothing will substitute for a commitment to safety by the people in the field who actually are at risk. We ask a lot of them in performing their duties, and it is difficult for any person to do everything right all the time. But we cannot allow the vigilance associated with safety issues to flag.

We are working with our partners, such as the US Department of Transportation and the American Public Transportation Association to assist us in establishing that culture of safety within a broader comprehensive and systematic safety program.

Metro's Board is a policy-setting body. Day-to-day decisions are handled by the General Manager and Metro staff. The Board, however, can and does set policy related to safety when needed. For example, last November the Board of Directors established a new Board policy requiring Metro staff to cooperate fully with the federally-recognized safety oversight agency, the Tri-State Oversight Committee (TOC). In addition, we support the federal government proposal to institute a robust program of safety regulation and oversight, and are pleased that in the interim the

District of Columbia, Maryland, and Virginia are taking immediate steps to strengthen the TOC. In addition to monthly safety reports to the Board by the staff and direction to the Inspector General to provide an ongoing independent review of safety activities, the Board has invited the TOC to report to us on a quarterly basis to ensure that we are fully apprised of relevant safety matters; we received the TOC's most recent presentation on April 8, 2010.

Metro's Financial Situation

Metro faces the same financial issues which practically every other major transit system in the United States does: in this period of economic decline many of our revenue sources, such as advertising and fares, have decreased, and the funds available for our subsidies have declined. Transit systems with dedicated sources of subsidy such as sales taxes have seen those funds decline and have had to cut staff, reduce service and increase fares, as well as defer capital projects in order to use those funds to fill operating gaps. Those which look to local governments to provide subsidies, as do we at Metro, find those governments dealing with lower tax revenues and the need to cut governmental services. Transit becomes one of a number of vital services that must be funded with fewer resources available. We are exceptionally pleased that our state and local partners have demonstrated a long history of strong financial support for this system. That strong support is continuing even in these tough economic times, as our jurisdictional partners are proposing to provide over half a billion dollars to support Metro operations in fiscal year 2011, while many other local

services are taking cuts. In addition, state and local governments will contribute in excess of \$200 million to capital programs in fiscal 2011.

Now let me turn to Metro's capital needs. As Metro has moved from being a new system to reaching the point at which we must invest substantially in the replacement of equipment and rehabilitation of infrastructure, our capital challenges have become similar to those of any other large, aging transit system. We have to replace our tracks, trains, and buses, and must rehabilitate our stations, bridges, and maintenance facilities. We have 30-year-old ventilation, lighting, and communications systems which must be maintained or replaced. Some of our station platforms are crumbling, our escalators and elevators need major repairs, and water is leaking into our tunnels. We must do all of the work required while providing service to hundreds of thousands of customers daily.

Although there are some actions which can be taken managerially and operationally to improve the reliability of Metrorail and Metrobus, the most significant factor is investing in the facilities and equipment. Old equipment breaks down more often than new equipment and must be taken out of service for repair. Old facilities fail, sometimes requiring service disruptions until they can be repaired. Even assuming that the dollars needed for upgrading the facilities and equipment were available, the process of carrying out the enhancement program disrupts service and degrades reliability. We must do all we can to carry out our capital program to renew

the system, but we must also be frank with our patrons: It will not be easy, and it will require inconveniences as we work.

We have been fortunate in that our funding partners have demonstrated strong support on the capital side, just as they have done on the operating side. Over the last six years, they have provided Metro with \$525 million more than was needed to match federal funds. As a result, Metro was able to make a number of critical investments in its system, including, for the first time, running 8-car trains. (When the Metro system first opened in 1976, we ran 4-car trains – hard to imagine today!)

Going forward, however, Metro needs increased investment to keep the system in a state of good repair. Metro's Capital Needs Inventory identifies investments totaling \$11.4 billion over the next ten years. This Committee led the charge for additional Metro funding, the first installment of which was appropriated last year. That funding will go a long way toward helping us to meet our future capital needs if it is appropriated each year as authorized.

However, our projected funding over the foreseeable future does not bring us where we need to be. Again, this is not unique to Metro. A study by the Federal Transit Administration (Rail Modernization Study, April 2009) found that the seven largest transit systems, including Metro, currently have a backlog of state of good repair needs totaling \$50 billion. Going forward, the study concluded that these systems would need an additional \$5.9 billion per year so as not to fall further behind.

Our state and local funding partners are doing what they can to support our efforts to maintain our system in a state of good repair. The key to our ultimate success, however, rests with you and your colleagues in Congress and the Administration. Increased support for the state of good repair needs of older systems is essential in the next surface transportation authorization if we are to continue to be able to provide safe and reliable service.

The Managerial Transition

Metro's Board is extremely pleased that it was able to convince a leader of Richard Sarles' experience and capability to delay his retirement and help us address our challenges while the Board seeks a new permanent general manager for the agency. In his first few weeks here Mr. Sarles has demonstrated a deep understanding of the issues facing Metro, and he is moving forward aggressively in a number of areas, which he will cover in his testimony.

The Metro Board is on the verge of selecting a search firm which will conduct a national and international search for the next permanent general manager. Understanding that we wish to move forward as quickly as possible, we intend to take the time needed to conduct a comprehensive recruitment process so that we can identify the best candidate for what I can honestly say – having seen it close-up – is

one of the toughest jobs in the transit industry. The General Manager of Metro must deal with the executive and legislative bodies of two states, the District of Columbia, a number of counties and cities, and last but certainly not least, the federal government. In fact, I would guess that there is at least one constituent from every Congressional district in this country who rides the Metro system at least once during the course of a year – and many ride considerably more often. Metro's General Manager must also be prepared to deal with continuous media coverage from local and national outlets, while at the same time, running the second largest rail and sixth largest bus system in the country. That takes an extraordinary person, and we will do everything in our power to find that person.

We have also had a substantial loss of senior management talent in the agency, and are experiencing a drain in dedicated and knowledgeable rank and file long-term employees as they reach retirement age. We understand that filling many of the senior positions will be difficult until we have a permanent General Manager in place, and this knowledge is a driver in making sure that the search for our new leader does not take any longer than necessary. In the interim we believe that we have found a competent and knowledgeable transit executive to lead the agency, and know that Mr. Sarles will make use of his many contacts in the industry to assist in providing resources not currently available in the organization. We also recognize that we need to start immediately in planning for the recruitment of not only the new General Manager, but for the replacement of many talented individuals who have left, or will

soon leave, the agency. Again, we are not alone in this situation. Many transit systems throughout the country face a similar staffing issue.

Mr. Chairman, in conclusion, I simply want to say: Metro's mission is to move people, safely, reliably, and comfortably. We are committed to improving our delivery of that mission. Thank you for allowing me to testify today, and I look forward to answering the Committee's questions.