



AAC

Accessibility Advisory Committee

Meeting Minutes: January 6, 2020

Attendees

Present: Denise Rush (Acting-Chair), Elver Ariza-Silva (Acting Vice-Chair), Darnise Bush, Tino Calabia, Vanessa Coles, Charlie Crawford, Rico Dancy, Melanie Jackson, Mary Kay McMahon, Phillipa Mezile, Anthony Oberg, Doris Ray, Paul Semelfort, Patrick Sheehan, Kelley Simoneaux, and Phil Posner (Chair - Remote Participation).

Call to Order

Acting Chair Rush called the Accessibility Advisory Committee (AAC) meeting to order at 5:30 pm and started with introductions of the members.

Approval of Agenda

The meeting agenda was approved as modified. The Meet & Greet Session with Board Member Stephanie Gidigbi would occur prior to the Approval of the Board Report and the Prior Meeting Minutes.

Meet & Greet Session with the Newly Elected Board Member:

Ms. Gidigbi was appointed to the Board in December 2019 as the First Vice Chair representing the District of Columbia. Ms. Gidigbi is an extensive user of public transit and is committed to ensure Metrorail, Metrobus, and MetroAccess work for all. Her purpose for attending the meeting was to listen and understand the concerns of the AAC members. Acting Chair Rush shared some of the concerns of the Committee such as, MetroAccess fares, flat fares, MetroAccess pass, the proposed surcharge of 25 cents on buses, and others. Mr. Sheehan stated AAC is looking for flat fare and fare simplification; MetroAccess flat fare will also be good business sense for WMATA as it will save money and simplify the fare structure. Acting Vice-Chair Ariza-Silva invited Ms. Gidigbi to join a DC AAC members for the ride-along program. Ms. Ray asked Ms. Gidigbi about her views on the Bus Transportation Project and shared concerns about bus service in the Fairfax County. Ms. Gidigbi hopes Metrobus becomes a priority and looks forward to public hearings and the budget process.

Approval of Agenda, Board Report, and Prior Meeting Minutes

The meeting agenda was approved as amended with topic of Taxi Notice to be discussed.

The December 2, 2019, meeting minutes were approved as written.

The Board Report was approved as amended. Mr. Dancy recommended to include a concern about the presence of ASL interpreters in Board Meetings. Dr. Posner confirmed that the Board Report would include that topic as well.

New Faregates - Sounds:

Terri Anomnachi, Project Manager, Capital Funding, demonstrated the three different sounds/indicator tones (success, fail, and fare evasion) for the faregates. After listening to the tones, the Committee unanimously rejected all of them for multiple reasons.

Carol Lopez, Director, ADAP, asked the Committee whether a tone for positive (success) indicator is needed since the faregates will still make the opening sound. Dr. Posner recommended to add vibration on the touch to help people who are blind or have low vision. Ms. Ray stated faregates opening sound is helpful as she uses her cane to guide, then recommended a lower frequency for all the tones. Acting Vice-Chair Ariza-Silva stated the success and fail tones are too short. Mr. Crawford recommended a ping-pong sound for success indications and a buzzer sound for fail indications. In response to Mr. Calabria's question about the need for the sounds, Ms. Lopez stated the sounds that indicate failure and fare evasion are required per the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Ms. Anomnachi thanked the Committee for their feedback.

WMATA Budget:

Acting Chair Rush asked about the dates for public hearings. John Pasek, Assistant Board Secretary, stated the Board was supposed to act last month on setting the docket for the hearings. As of now, the hearings will be held the week of February 24th. There will be a public hearing in the District of Columbia (WMATA Headquarters), Maryland, and Northern Virginia. The locations for public hearings in Maryland and Virginia are currently being reviewed. When the dates and times are determined, the information will be shared with the AAC. Acting Chair Rush urged everyone to attend at least one of the meetings, regardless of their jurisdictions. Dr. Posner asked to ensure that the locations are accessible. Christiaan Blake, Managing Director, Access Services, stated as per requirements and as has been the commitment over the past seven years, all locations picked for public-hearings will be accessible, and transit-friendly, but, where needed, shuttle service will be provided.

Dr. Posner will provide talking points to the Committee and stated we need to compliment WMATA for the positive things that are being done, such as the DC pilot project. He also commended Mr. Blake on his assurance that if there are bus cuts, it would not impact the MetroAccess service in the immediate term. Mr. Blake stated he has no sense that there will be cuts, however if the decision is made to reduce certain bus routes, we have taken steps to go above and beyond the ADA to mitigate the impact on MetroAccess customers. Ms. Ray recommended there should be two public hearings in Virginia as it is unfair for people from Fairfax County to travel all the way to Arlington County. In case, there is only one hearing, then it should be in Falls Church or at a location closer to Fairfax. Mr. Pasek stated there are many different determining factors for deciding on a location, for example, location availability, transit accessibility, the routes being impacted, etc. The public hearings are a great avenue for people to provide feedback, however surveys on the website are also available.

WMATA Policy – Interpreters:

In regard to interpreter service requests, Mr. Pasek stated that we have a policy that requires people to inform us prior, however given the scope of the public hearings, we are going to have interpreters on all three public hearings.

METROACCESS Service Providers:

Acting Chair Rush inquired about the new Abilities-Ride service providers that have been finalized. Mr. Blake stated the Abilities-Ride solicitation has been a long process. The program is expanding with a total of 12 companies, with Uber being the last company added. The commitment was that we will have at least two companies in each jurisdiction, providing customers multiple options for alternative service. MetroAccess will always be there, as per the law, and that is our commitment, but now MetroAccess customers will now have more options for transportation.

Mr. Semelfort inquired as to whether companies like Uber would add surcharges, be straight trips, and how a customer would know about their level of service. Acting Chair Rush reminded all that there will be information sessions for customers. Mr. Blake stated there will be four customer information sessions on various Saturdays. Acting Chair Rush emphasized that it is the choice of the customer to use a company based on their pricing. Mr. Semelfort stated there is a restriction about Abilities-Ride usage for four trips per day, would there be a consideration to change it to a specific number per week. Mr. Blake stated the restriction is to have up to four trips per day and we are very far away from making any changes at this time. Regarding programs like these, the decisions tend to be in the other direction of decreasing rather than increasing trips. We are going to work very hard to avoid this and make it work.

Mr. Crawford shared an experience with an Abilities Ride company on January 5th, where he was told a ride will arrive in 15 minutes. He called back after 15 minutes and was told they were looking for a cab. He called again for an update and was told the driver denied the service. Mr. Blake requested verification that the service provider was Regency Taxi. He asked Mr. Crawford to call his office to provide specifics and he will provide a phone number to report the taxi operator and perhaps the driver would be removed from the program. Right now, Regency is the only company providing service in Montgomery County, which is going to change soon. We will be adding other service providers, giving options to customers.

Ms. Bush asked how many alternatives will be in the District of Columbia besides TransportDC. Mr. Blake clarified that TransportDC is not part of Abilities-Ride, however Via, Curb, District Taxi, Uber, and Yellow Taxi are part of the program, and will be available to DC residents to choose from. He added that one of the companies that is servicing human services will be implementing Black Car service out of DC as well. Ms. Bush asked about restrictions. Mr. Blake stated the only restriction on Abilities-Ride is the number of trips per day, not destinations as with the TransportDC program.

Ms. Simoneaux stated her concerns related to the availability of the wheelchair accessible vehicles (WAVs), and the acceptance of the customer by the driver. In situations when a driver refuses a customer and there is no way to contact the Transportation Network Company (TNCs), how is that going to be resolved? Mr. Blake stated each company is required to have a way of customer feedback and communication and shared his experience. There are various ways of communicating with companies in an immediate fashion. The consumers have choices and can make their own decisions on the service providers. Mr. Blake used an example of the company serving Prince George's County.

Even though the company is staffed by people, they may not be able to answer their phones for various reasons. We did not want to impose certain requirements on these companies that they are not already doing, because that becomes a service that is closer to Metro service. The effort is to keep the two services as choices for customers.

When cabs are sent for MetroAccess rides, the same rules and service apply to the cabs as MetroAccess. Under the Abilities-Ride program, even though they may be the same companies, they provide the service according to their standards. There may always be a challenge for the WAVs. What we have done is incentivize the drivers by giving them more money for the WAVs and we have helped the company spread those vehicles out amongst jurisdictions. You have heard the creative idea by Via that instead of paying drivers per trip, they are paying the driver per hour, to ensure the WAVs are available on the roads. As we move forward, we may hear of the issues as they arise. However, he has the power of withdrawing the participation in the Abilities-Ride of the company. We do not have a service contract with these companies; we have a payment agreement where we subsidize the fares. If we hear too many problems about a company, we can tell the customer they cannot use that specific company with the subsidies.

Mr. Sheehan asked when does the service start? Mr. Blake stated that is going to happen after we complete the showcases. Mr. Sheehan asked how does Uber on his phone differentiate from Uber on Abilities-Ride? Mr. Blake stated he is scheduling trips for MetroAccess limited users, at this time. In terms of differentiating the regular Uber service versus the Abilities-Ride Uber service, he is working on it and will share the information as it becomes available.

Ms. Ray stated for Fairfax County residents, there are only two providers, Uber and Old Dominion Taxi, how many regular vehicles and WAVs will be available. Acting-Chair Rush stated these questions can be asked and answered in the sessions that Mr. Blake has mentioned earlier.

Mr. Dancy asked if Mr. Blake has used Lyft before and indicated he had a shared ride in Cleveland that had a wheelchair ramp. Mr. Blake stated Lyft was not a company selected for this program.

Public Comments:

A customer stated his concerns about various topics: MetroAccess customers being attacked on the vehicles, information access, MetroAccess fares, Abilities-Ride fares complexity (regulating the fares) as various companies provide different cost per miles, an update on the MetroAccess application (app) to track vehicles, and an update on MetroAccess sedans. Mr. Blake stated we cannot regulate the Abilities-Ride pricing as it is not MetroAccess service. The fares for the pick-up and the return trip may differ as we do not get to tell the drivers the route they should take. MetroAccess customers would know the price up front when they call to book the trip. Concerning the Sedans, the Procurement has to complete its process, hopefully by the end of March. Regarding the MetroAccess app, the global positioning system (GPS) or ranger, Terrian Williams-Hall, Director, MetroAccess, provided an update.

A customer commended MetroAccess for receiving information from a dispatcher in real-time, instead of being transferred to a supervisor for that information. That was positive and thanked Mr. Blake for the immediate change. His concern was about the difference of fares from first trip versus the return trip. Mr. Semelfort shared his experience about the change of fares from the first trip versus the return trip, as well. The explanation was that the mileage may differ going and returning from the same place, as the route may slightly change. Mr. Blake also stated that we do not dictate the routes the drivers take as they may adopt an alternate route to avoid traffic or other road conditions. However, MetroAccess customers know their fare at the time of booking trips.

Ms. Rush stated she is getting too many calls about customers arriving too early at their destinations and asked for the possible reasons. Mr. Blake asked Ms. Rush to provide specifics so that the trips could be reviewed and remedied for future trips. Ms. Williams-Hall stated INRIX, the scheduling provider, is expected to apply updates to the system in one week to alleviate this issue. The MetroAccess Office is prepared if in the event the update does not provide a solution, the real-time traffic will be rolled back, and turn-by-turn instructions will be provided. The application shows an overlay of the traffic conditions and this backup will happen until we can get the new system.

Bus/Rail Subcommittee Report (BRS):

Mr. Calabria talked about an article he shared with the Committee prior to the meeting. In response to a customer's earlier comment about MetroAccess being one of the most expensive systems, Mr. Calabria stated that New York is a much bigger system and costs much less in comparison to WMATA. Mr. Calabria asked if he could be commissioned to contact the New York System to get more information about the shared article. Dr. Posner stated being the BRS Chair, he may contact them without approval of the Committee.

MetroAccess Subcommittee Report (MAS):

Ms. Semelfort amended the MAS agenda for January's meeting and shared his concerns about the statistics and inquired what is being done to remedy the issues. Mr. Semelfort reviewed the topics that were discussed in December's MAS Meeting.

Meeting adjourned at 7:30pm.