

Public Comment

Metro Board of Directors Meeting

April 28, 2022



Ancil Torres (Montgomery County, MD)

I have a growing number of concerns about ADA paratransit fares and WMATA's failure to publicly acknowledge the problems and deal with them. Over the years the disabled community has been abused with 180% increase in their fares over a one year period and on top of that the disabled have been overcharged by MetroAccess. This is just the tip of a very dysfunctional MetroAccess program that has plagued the disabled community for the past 11 years.

Mr. Paul Wiedefeld, WMATA's GM and the Board needs to deal with the issues of mistreatment of the disabled community and publicly atone for its sins. Only then, can the problems be solved.

Ignoring the issues will not make them go away.

One of the most disturbing policies at WMATA is the requirement that all cash paying disabled passengers must pay their fare on the sidewalk, before boarding all paratransit vehicles. By comparison, no Metrobus customers are required to do the same. Actually, WMATA is the only one of the top three largest paratransit systems in the country that has adopted this discriminatory practice.

WMATA justifies this heavy-handed policy because they claim that a few paratransit riders once boarded their vehicle and refused to pay their fare. So, if you are a disabled paratransit rider it means that you are considered a high-risk fare cheat suspect at WMATA. Essentially this policy says, lock the disabled down tight so that, God forbid, none of them can get away from paying their \$6.50 highest paratransit fare in the land.

Does this seem familiar? Yes, it is called disabled profiling, the ugly cousin of racial profiling.

Is this policy a demonstration of Metro's sound effective fiscal management of taxpayer dollars that fund the system, or a highhanded discriminatory over reaction?

Let us look at the facts. WMATA reports that in the first half of FY2022 about 34% of Metrobus riders did not pay their fare. This has resulted in a loss of ten million dollars. If this trend continues it could mean that Metro will sustain a loss of at least twice that at the end of the year. This is not a new problem. It has been going on for years and years. Has WMATA introduced any policies to force all Metrobus riders to pay their fare on the sidewalk before boarding?

No. Have they introduced any policies to lock down or profile Metrobus passengers in any way so that they must pay their fare before boarding? No. Is there any realistic chance, based on Metro's history, that they will crack down on these Metrobus fare cheats? No. Actually the DC Council voted 11 to 2 to decriminalize fare evasion on Metro. Metro has also lowered the fares for Metro riders on the weekend.

By comparison there are no official multimillion dollar Metro paratransit fare evasion loss reports or even one news media report of MetroAccess riders not paying to ride. Even if every last MetroAccess paratransit rider evaded their fare for one year, which will never happen, it would only amount to \$5 million anyway. Metro estimates that they will lose upwards of \$50 million in fares this year when Metrorail and Metrobus fare evasion losses are combined.

So, why the hostile, over-the-top, discriminatory profiling of disabled riders when you don't have a real problem with disabled fare evaders? This reminds me of states that boasts of the security and integrity of their election system, yet they are hell bent on passing an avalanche of restrictive legislation to protect the vote that will discourage many from voting or participating in elections on any level.

Metro representatives said that they adopted this policy of discrimination profiling in consultation with the WMATA Accessibility Advisory Committee (AAC). It was very shocking and devastating to get this news since this committee is made up of only disabled people. It feels like WMATA is recruiting disabled individuals who are being used to work against the interest of the community this way if anyone questions their disabled policy, all they have to say is that they have the blessing of all these disabled folks on the AAC. How very clever, convenient, but exploitative of Metro to use members of the disabled community to protect their hides. This is so wrong.

Other than the blatant discrimination and disrespect of being forced to pay on the sidewalk, there is the hardship and dangers of the practice. Here are just a few:

1. Opening a purse or wallet and exposing your money in some neighborhoods cannot be considered safe because of the criminal element
2. Has any Metro paratransit policy maker tried to pay their fare in rain, in snow, in severe cold, or in high winds with a disability? Just in case there is a “small chance” that they have not, I have, and it is a stressful, painful, and difficult exercise. For sighted folks who make Metro policy, close your eyes, simulating blindness, and try to take folded dollar bills from different compartments of your purse or wallet with thick gloves on in freezing temperatures and winds blowing. Let me predict, you will not be able to do it.

How could any person on the AAC approve this wrongheaded harmful policy? It is beyond my ability to comprehend. I consider this a case of disability advocacy malpractice.

Let me say clearly that I do not believe that anyone should break the law and refuse to pay their fare.

One way to fix this problem is for Metro to adopt a free fare ADA paratransit policy.

Short of that, for the minuscule number of paratransit passengers who refuse to pay their fare after boarding, simply let the rider know that fare evasion is a violation of the law. If the passenger still refuses to pay, transport the rider to the scheduled destination so that other passengers and the driver's schedule are not disrupted. However, the offending passenger should not be allowed to book another trip until the fare is paid. This way only the fare evader is impacted and paying customers will not be affected.

Adopting measures like disability profiling that forces disabled riders to pay on the sidewalk is clumsy and draconian policy making. It is collective punishment of all disabled paratransit riders for the sins of a microscopic minority of fare evasion sinners. Policy reform is desperately needed at MetroAccess. It is time for reform and reboot at WMATA.

Brian Gannon (Arlington County, VA)

Dear WMATA Board Please, please, please prioritize and expedite the return of the 7000-series cars - whatever it takes. 20-minute headways are unacceptable, especially w/ peak fares. My commute is to/from Reston. I'm writing this because I just missed a train by 15 seconds and have 20 minutes to kill. Shady Grove and Glenmont (every 10 minutes), Greenbelt (soon to be 2 trains every 15 minutes) and Largo (2 trains every 20 minutes) are all terminal stations with more frequent service than any terminal in Virginia. Riders to and from the end of the line stations pay the highest fares and typically pay for parking as well. Maybe you could consider reinstating turnbacks to provide more equitable service across the region. Also, please consider suspending peak fares and/or parking fees until regular service resumes. Most importantly, stop taking your customers for granted. I'm a transit advocate but I'm reaching the end of my patience with Metro. I've already found other options for most of my non-work trips, especially those that would involve a transfer. It's hard to advocate for such subpar service. Things need to change - and soon. Thank you.

David Herbst (Alexandria, VA)

I am extremely frustrated by the continuing reduced service on the yellow line. I understand the necessity of having a deliberate approach to the derailment mitigation development plans, but the lack of transparency regarding the progress of those plans is unacceptable. Additionally, I would like to know who or how many people will face consequences for allowing this situation to develop in the first place. I am certain there were one or more people at the root of this problem, either inside WMATA or outside (the train manufacturer?) Without consequence we, Metro's stakeholders, are forced to rely on Metro employees' own introspection and self improvement for overall system improvements. This is an unreasonable ask for any organization, and if those things were normally within reach in our society we probably wouldn't have nearly as many social problems as we do right now. So, that being said, I renew my calls for the root cause analysis of the derailment to be released and for those responsible to be held accountable.

Jane Kepler (Prince Georges County, MD)

Please extend the blue (or green!) line to the National Harbor area. I just moved from the District to Friendly, MD and even though by car I am only 20 minutes further from my work in Federal Triangle, it takes me a full hour and a half longer to get there due to lack of reliable public transit. I am very excited about the proposal to extend the blue line from Alexandria to National Harbor and feel that would be a very simple way to accommodate many people who are underserved by public transit in this area. In the meantime, please improve bus service down Indian Head highway and the surrounding communities to metro stations and downtown DC. It would be amazing if there was an express bus that went straight into DC via 295 from the Fort Washington/Friendly area, as many people who live here work downtown or would like to go to baseball games or go out in the city without worrying about parking. A designated bus lane for regularly scheduled express busses would be perfect and would improve traffic congestion and decrease accidents.

Stewart Schwartz (MetroNow)

MetroNow is committed to better transit and we believe the short-term recovery and long-term economic prosperity of our region relies on a safe, reliable and efficient regional transit system with WMATA serving as the backbone. We thank the Board for your service, while urging better communication to the public. As such, we ask for answers to the following critical questions:

- What is the status of the regional bus network redesign project?
- How many 6000-series Metro railcars will be in service by the end of May and how many will remain out of service?
- When will the Board hold a session on the impacts and options to address the “fiscal cliff” (for operating expenses) expected next budget cycle?
- Will you communicate to the public more information about the 7000-series investigation, and the plan and timing for full return to service?
- The recent safety audit indicated serious problems with WMATA’s safety culture. How will WMATA address this?

We look forward to your responses to our questions. Thank you.

E.P. (Outside Resident)

1. I hear more 6ks are coming back. So great to hear especially since those personally are my favorite. Great there going to Green and Yellow and potentially Blue too so I can see them much more often like pre Covid days. I wanted to ask when said and done even though there's a giant railcar shortage with 7ks suspended can just the 6ks be 8 cars? I ask because I ofc heard from y'all that crowds are starting to form again and obviously a little bit of 8 car trains could alleviate that. The 2ks and 3ks being 6 cars is pretty normal and understandable with this shortage of railcars but the 6ks I feel should be 8 cars if crowds are coming back since they cover the whole platform not 3/4 of it. I know too before the derailment they were almost all 8 cars so definitely what a lot of people are used too it when it comes to them. Since 182 out of 184 are for passengers 22 8 car trains and 1 6 car ya I'm sure would really ease them if all are back before or after this 7k issue.

2. I am absolutely in favor of the idea of temporarily suspending people who commit heinous acts. A lot of people I realize say no simply cause most of these people committing these acts are black. As a man who is half black, I realize that being racist isn't the intent of this ban. It is to keep innocent people black or white safe and not in fear. Just because most of these suspects are black it doesn't necessarily mean its racist and I like the idea of providing the option to appeal if someone feels like their being mistaken for someone else I believe too that while rights are absolutely important (if people don't abuse them) I feel safety is more importaner and obviously without consequences a person won't learn their lesson and will keep doing it. I hear that some are repeat offenders too so ya. And hearing others say excuses like this is their only mode of transportation is kind of like a personal problem to me and that it is a sign that they shouldn't abuse their privileges. And of course, if cope are being too abusive then the good news is that you all will have the right to repeal it and get rid of it for our sake.

3. I am also a little confused too on 2 out of the 4 renamings recently. The White Flint and Tysons corner ones make sense with the area being called Tysons and the White Flint mall not being around no more but the LTC and PG Plaza ones don't make a whole lot of sense to me. Isn't the PG Plaza name mostly coming from the mall at Prince Georges and plus the county name and of course already a perfectly good station next door with the word Hyattsville in it and while I don't see anything wrong with Town Center since the Largo Town Center shopping area is still present, if we have to get rid of it how come it can't just be "Largo" since that was an option and that was what most voted for. Like what does "Downtown" mean since there really isn't a Downtown Largo? I remember saying in the survey while Largo Town Center isn't a big deal I would be perfectly fine with just Largo. I am also curious to wonder what would happen if any of these name changes got rejected too since I feel that these are always automatically agreeing to council members despite surveys saying the opposite and feeling like they don't mean much. Like would you guys get punished by any means if there requests aren't granted?

4. Also, congrats about the 8k news recently! Can't wait to check them out once they hit the rails!!! Although, I hear there are considerations that as much as 800 8ks could be ordered. I personally think 800 is a bit much for 1 fleet like what if they were to get sidelined for any reason like the 7ks now? Then service be reduced badly but 256 not too much or too little number wise wouldn't be much service reductions if they were to get sidelined for safety concerns like now with the 7ks. And of course the 6ks are still very new age wise debuting in late 2006 just 7 years, 3 months before the 7ks and are (in my personal opinion) the best fleet y'all have to offer. I've heard a lot of others day the same. It's definitely impossible to dislike them lol. So smooth, clean, modern and obviously no major history of safety issues and they still have like 22-23 years left of reliability left and y'all should wait to retire them until the year 2044 or 2045 when it'll be inevitable and replace them with the 9ks and of course in normal cases are almost all 8 cars like the 7ks. And there's got to be some sort of legacy to the system with the Brown and White exterior excluding cars 6180 and 6181.

A premature retirement would be devastating for us longtime riders especially if they don't have a big checkered past like the 5ks did sadly. I've had many others say the same thing too. I also hope Randi Miller's voice doesn't get eliminated on the 6ks because I have heard rumors it could, and I couldn't stand the thought of sort of erasing her voice from existence since many people have enjoyed it and I feel like the door chime voice change would take away it's true colors and identity. The 7k and upcoming 8k features and automated announcements are dope but it doesn't gotta be copied and replacing the legendary Randi Miller. I know I don't have much of a right to say this but I believe each fleet I believe should have it's own identity and own unique features. As said above, there needs to be a little bit of legacy too by any means not just brand new stuff. I've heard from at least a dozen others too saying the same thing. Anyway, thanks for the time and love y'all.