



October 2020

Dear Chairman Smedberg and Members of the Board:

I am pleased to provide an update on the activities of the RAC during October.

FY21 Budget Revisions and FY22 Budget Proposals

The RAC has continued to discuss FY21 budget revision proposals including and especially with riders across our region. Public comments made by WMATA riders at our September and October meetings can only be described as painful. It is clear that existing levels of service are causing deep anguish perhaps foremost to Metrobus riders. Riders for whom telework is simply impossible---including critical national security personnel, seniors, and those reliant on WMATA to overcome accessibility challenges---are under incredible stress, in addition to the general trauma of living in the midst of a seemingly uncontrolled global pandemic. This sentiment was plain to anyone participating or watching last week's public budget discussion.

While we recognize that service cuts in January are more or less inevitable, we strongly encourage the board direct WMATA staff to explore means and develop plans to rapidly restore service should the next Congress pass a bill providing additional pandemic related aid.

We do not envy the choices the board must soon make. We ask simply that you prioritize the preservation of routes that primarily serve the groups alluded to above. Please remember that the choices you make now will echo long into the future: how many frequent riders may instead switch to other modes, especially private cars? How difficult will it be to win those riders back?

Covid Response

We wish also to again raise our ongoing concern about the fact that more than seven months into this pandemic, riders do not have access to the 1,000,000 cloth masks provided by the FTA in the spring. In contrast larger transit agencies (e.g., New York City Transit/MTA) were able to implement mask and sanitizer distribution in May. And while it may now (as of Monday Evening 2020-10-19)

be that stations may now have sanitizer stations, WMATA is months behind other major transit US agencies in their introduction.¹

Whereas other transit agencies, have been forthright with customers on the way their trains and buses' ventilation systems work and how quickly they replace the air inside each vehicle. Take for example San Francisco's Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART). In August, BART published a technically detailed yet easily comprehensible blog post on the specifics of how their railcar air filtration systems worked.² They also published an accompanying thread of tweets that laid out the key points of the post.³ Numerous WMATA riders and RAC members took note of the posts and the series of tweets. In mid-October, Portland, Oregon's TriMet also published a similar blog post, a video, and series of tweets.^{4 5 6} Finally, BART has provided crowding charts with weekly updates to help riders make informed and responsible decisions on when to travel.⁷

In contrast, WMATA's efforts at communicating their Covid response has been vague at best. For example, WMATA's description of "enhanced cleaning protocols" describes "Daily cleaning and disinfecting of trains, buses, and stations with mopping, wiping down high-touch surfaces or using electrostatic foggers." While these are all good things, they are vague, do not address rider concerns about vehicle ventilation, and seem to be grounded on the assumption that Covid spreads through surface contact and not through airborne particles. WMATA's efforts to adapt and communicate on this and any other number of issues critical to riders is wholly insufficient at best, well produced TV advertising notwithstanding.⁸

¹ Jordan Pascale "Masks and hand sanitizer at Takoma station down the street from me. #WMATA folks told me it arrived this week." (2020-10-19 17:47) <https://ttm.sh/dpX>.

² BART. "Ventilation on BART: What you need to know about airflow and more." (2020-08-13) <https://ttm.sh/dpy>.

³ BART. "Let's talk air flow in BART cars." (2020-08-13) <https://ttm.sh/dp6>.

⁴ Portland TriMet. "All About Ventilation and Airflow on MAX and TriMet buses." (2020-10-15) <https://ttm.sh/dpx>.

⁵ Portland TriMet. "Airflow matters right now – good ventilation can be key for preventing the spread of COVID-19." (2020-10-19) <https://ttm.sh/dp->.

⁶ BART. "Very cool video from our [Portland TriMet] friends in Portland [with regard to] their light rail vehicles' ventilation systems!" (2020-10-19) <https://ttm.sh/dpV>

⁷ BART. "Crowding Charts" <https://ttm.sh/dAD>.

⁸ Vimeo. "Metro: Doing Our Part" <https://ttm.sh/h9h.mp4>.

Metrobus Service Guidelines

Our October meeting was primarily dedicated to a discussion of proposed revisions to the Metrobus Service Guidelines.⁹ While RAC members have been asked to submit comments to the project team by the end of the month, a few points are important to raise here:

1. We lack full definitions of specific terms.

For example, terms like "BRT" (p. 9) have specific technical definitions that no transit service in the DC provides.¹⁰ For example, Metroway in Arlington still requires onboard payment---a critical component of true Bus Rapid Transit as defined by the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy.¹¹

2. Will these guidelines result in bus stop consolidation?

Stop consolidation is an often fraught---if necessary---step in overall improvements to bus service. Consolidation can free up resources to allow for additional investment in bus stop facilities. Because WMATA does not necessarily own the bus stops its buses service. We encourage WMATA to work with regional partners to establish a minimum standard for bus stops, including real-time service information, sidewalk accessibility/connectivity, etc.

3. Do these policy changes foreshadow a meaningful network redesign?

Bus networks from cities as diverse as Houston (notably missing from our presentation's list of peer transit providers) and Richmond have seen significant ridership increases following network redesign projects. It hopefully goes without saying that network redesigns are challenging for transit agencies and passengers. They are the alternative to a "transit death spiral" where declining service quality leads to lower ridership, leading into service cuts and even further declines in service quality, etc.

The RAC is very grateful to Peter Cafiero, Allison Davis, and Al Himes for their work to develop these revised service guidelines and for what these changes may portend.

⁹ Metrobus Service Guidelines <https://ttm.sh/dAh>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Institute for Transportation and Development Policy. "The Bus Rapid Transit Standard." <https://ttm.sh/dAQ>.

Accessibility Concerns

Finally, we want to join our colleagues on the Accessibility Advisory Committee in highlighting two significant challenges faced by riders across the region:

1. New Platform Displays (PIDS) on the Blue, Orange, and Yellow Lines **do not** display as much information as WMATA's legacy platform displays

For example, new displays may provide some elevator or escalator outages, but far from all of them and hardly in a timely fashion. Thus, riders (who may not have smartphones) cannot make fully informed decisions about their journeys and as such would find themselves in a precarious situation. To compound matters, new PIDS are often poorly spaced from one another and are not easily visible. In many cases other objects (e.g., stairs and escalators) also block PIDS sight-lines. This is all predicated on the new PIDS actually functioning. Instead, PIDS seem to me more concerned with a detailed introduction to the features of Microsoft Windows.¹²

2. WMATA's website does not meet basic web accessibility criteria

AAC members and members of the public raised concerns at our October meeting about the inaccessibility of certain parts of the WMATA website, including and especially the FY21 Budget Revisions page and the information that had been posted to it. The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) is a body established to coordinate the development of the technologies that makes the internet we know it. By the W3C's own standards, wmata.com fails on a number of metrics, including but not limited to color contrasting between foreground and background, the issue first noted by our AAC colleagues.¹³

As always, the RAC is willing and able to serve as a resource for members of the Board. Please do feel free to contact me at rac@anelki.net.

Very sincerely yours,



Andrew Kierig
WMATA Riders Advisory Council Chair

¹² e.g., at Vienna-Fairfax: <https://ttm.sh/h9d.jpg>

¹³ <https://www.w3.org/WAI/standards-guidelines/>