



23 September 2019

Dear Chairman Smedberg and Members of the Board:

It is my distinct pleasure to report on the activities of the Riders' Advisory Council at our September meeting.

Fiscal Year 2021 Budget

The RAC is grateful for the chance to consult on the coming FY 2021 budget at such an early point in the budget process. To that end, we had the pleasure of hearing from Yetunde Olumide, Vice President of the Office of Management and Budget Services.

The Riders' Advisory Council agrees with the broad principles outlined in the General Manager's January 2019 *Keeping Metro Safe, Reliable, and Affordable* (KMSRA 2019) plan. Furthermore, we recognize the ongoing need for major State of Good Repair projects, e.g., power infrastructure and radio system upgrades. Nevertheless, KMSRA 2019 does not address the need for substantive improvements in the quality, consistency, and frequency of WMATA Communications. Nor does KMSRA 2019 address the urgent need to improve bus and rail off-peak service levels or better manage disruptive evening and weekend maintenance projects. We believe that these concerns must be at the heart of the FY2021 Budget.

The RAC recognizes that the Board will revisit existing fare levels as part of the FY2021 budget development process. Reviewing existing fare levels provides the Board with an additional chance to assess the degree to which WMATA is meeting its objectives. At previous RAC meetings, we have discussed the need to ensure that WMATA fares and service levels are equitable to all riders. For that reason, given current service levels and quality, the RAC cannot endorse a base fare increase. With that said, we

believe the review of fare levels provides the chance to think creatively about the overall fare structure to benefit both riders and the agency.

Metrorail fares are calculated with a base fare of \$2 to \$2.25 and a distance component based on “composite miles” that increases in increments of \$0.25.¹ At the present time, fares are capped at a maximum of \$6.00 and \$3.85 during peak and off-peak service levels respectively. This artificially caps fares for longer suburban commuters and imposes higher costs on shorter trips where WMATA competes with micromobility (e.g, scooters and bikeshare) and rideshare companies, often making WMATA uncompetitive on a price basis.² The RAC believes that this creates a perverse incentive to choose micromobility or rideshare instead of Metrobus or Metrorail. The potential opening of the Silver Line’s Phase II in FY21 is illustrative: suburban commuters from Loudoun and points west would, in effect, be subsidized by the overwhelming majority of Metrorail ridership.

The RAC does not believe that the Board should increase fares in this year’s review of fare policy. However, if the Board chooses to raise fares, any fare increase should be implemented by raising the fare cap and not increasing the base fare.

Conscious of the fact that fare increases adversely affect those who are most economically vulnerable, the RAC proposes the Board to work with WMATA jurisdictions to implement a program to subsidize the purchase of WMATA unlimited passes for those least able to afford them. As proposed in WMATA’s 2018 *Stabilizing and Growing Metro Ridership* report, a subsidized pass product would significantly ease the impact of fare increases on lower income customers, the same customers who are least likely to receive transit subsidies or pre-tax transit benefits.³

¹ WMATA Tariff 38, February 2018. Available at: <http://bit.ly/wmatafares18>

² On the idiosyncratic nature of WMATA’s fare structure in relation to other transit agencies, see: Rowlands, D. W. “WMATA plans to raise rates, but Metrorail’s fares already among highest in the country.” D.C. Policy Center, 1 March 2017. Available at: <http://bit.ly/dw-fares>

³ *Stabilizing and Growing Metro Ridership*, page 24. Available at: <http://bit.ly/wmata-ride>

For Metrobus riders, especially those with lower or fixed incomes, a fare increase would be profoundly inequitable. The uncertain implementation of the improvements suggested by the Bus Transformation Project echos the collective failure of similar efforts since the early 2000s. A recent study jointly conducted by the Coalition for Smarter Growth and MetroHero demonstrates the ongoing need for rapid improvements in regional bus infrastructure, using the WMATA Priority Corridor Network routes as an example.⁴ The routes examined—ostensibly some of the most important in the District of Columbia—found headway and schedule adherence to be 64% and 60% respectively, with an average speed of 9.5mph. While WMATA cannot unilaterally build bus lanes, it can implement service changes like all-door boarding.

In the 2018 *Stabilizing and Growing Metro Ridership* report, WMATA staff projected that all-door boarding would result in faster, more efficient operations, resulting in a potential 10% increase in ridership and thus greater farebox recovery.⁵ Furthermore, as noted in the June 2019 RAC report and presentation, San Francisco’s implementation of all-door bus boarding has resulted in faster buses, a higher level of farebox compliance (resulting in \$1.9 million in additional fare revenues), and an overall ridership increase.⁶ It is for these reasons that the RAC is opposed to a Metrobus fare increase, especially as Metro has declined to take steps proposed by its own staff to achieve a significantly more efficient bus operation, reduce fare evasion, and increase ridership. The region faces a choice: build bus infrastructure and optimize the bus network or prepare to reckon with further ridership and service quality declines, in effect the “transit death spiral” for a vital component of the regional transportation system.

Finally, the RAC was puzzled by a description of the fare review process as the need to “strike a balance between taxpayers and riders.” This struck many RAC members as a

⁴ The Metrobus Report Card examined the performance of Priority Corridor Network routes in the District of Columbia. Available at: metrobusreportcard.com

⁵ *Stabilizing and Growing Metro Ridership*, page 11. Available at: <http://bit.ly/wmata-ride>

⁶ San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency *All-Door Boarding Evaluation Final Report*. Available at: <http://bit.ly/smfta>

false dichotomy. While it is conceivable that someone could pass through WMATA's entire service area without engaging in any other economic activity that would incur taxation, it is highly unlikely. Riders are taxpayers and an argument that grounds itself on the idea that taxpayers and riders have competing interests is doomed to fail.

Improving Access to Unlimited Passes

As part of the FY2020 budget, WMATA introduced a number of new and enhanced pass products designed to increase ridership and provide better value to customers. While these passes could potentially save riders significant sums of money per month, they are exceedingly difficult to purchase. Straightforward pass purchase information on WMATA.com is difficult to find and is spread across multiple pages. A single page which featured more graphical information than blocks of text and which uses an easily remembered URL (e.g., WMATA.com/unlimited) would be a positive step forward. For riders without regular internet access or who are unbanked, these passes are almost totally inaccessible. Furthermore, WMATA must simplify the SmartBenefits process, making it as simple as possible for customers to buy passes using SmartBenefits. At the present time, the largest single block of weekday commuters, federal employees, are apparently unable to purchase passes, a lost opportunity to convert weekday commuters into off-peak users.

Metro Must Communicate Quality

As the RAC has repeatedly highlighted, WMATA must communicate its quality. Statistically, Metrorail service has improved since SafeTrack. But riders and regional stakeholders continue to report that communications, especially during service disruptions are insufficient and often fail to accurately report the necessary information. For example, on Friday the 20th of September, multiple incidents during the morning rush caused significant disruption for riders along the Orange, Silver, and Blue lines. For the duration of these incidents, it was ultimately unclear how WMATA was responding and how riders should themselves respond to severe service disruptions. Information available on the PIDS in each Metrorail station was unclear at best, frequently reverting to simply displaying train arrival times of "DLY" without further

context. Empowering station managers to provide better real time travel information and advice, as WMATA staff suggested in May 2018, could significantly improve service quality and customer experience.⁷

Improve Realtime Service Information

In its existing form, Metro's realtime data is not provided in the standard General Transit Feed Specification Realtime (GTFS-R) format. Providing WMATA's data in a more standard format would enable more transit apps and trip planning tools (e.g., Google Maps Transit) to provide significantly more reliable information than the schedule only data they currently provide, as schedule data are effectively meaningless during service disruptions.⁸ Contrast this with the announcement by San Francisco's Bay Area Rapid Transit to provide realtime disruption information from their Rail Operations Control Center via the GTFS-R specification.⁹ In a similar vein, the schedule data provided to WMATA's data feeds is updated inconsistently and often fails to reflect the most recent schedule data. Finally, realtime bus service data is hindered by non-functional, misconfigured, or simply not powered on transceivers to transmit bus location data. This lack of accurate service information results in missed bus-rail connections and is likely a drag on Metrobus overall ridership.

Blue/Yellow Platform Project 2019

The RAC wishes to commend Jim Hamre and Michael Weinberger from WMATA's Office of Bus Planning for their considerable efforts to prepare and manage the replacement shuttle and bus program during this past summer's platform reconstruction project. The RAC looks forward to working with them during the coming shutdowns in 2020 and 2021. We are grateful for their forthright answers to our questions and their responsiveness to our concerns.

⁷ *Stabilizing and Growing Metro Ridership*, page 18. Available at: <http://bit.ly/wmata-ride>

⁸ Ibid. and WMATA API Real Time Rail Predictions. Available at: <http://bit.ly/met-apis>. General Transit Feed Specification Realtime. Available at: <http://bit.ly/met-gtfs>

⁹ Bay Area Rapid Transit, 17 September 2019. Available at: <http://bit.ly/bart-rt>

As always, the RAC stands ready to work with the Board and WMATA staff to take the steps necessary to win back riders and improve service quality. We look forward to serious and ongoing engagement to serve the region and solve our transportation challenges.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Andrew Kierig". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. The first name "Andrew" is written with a large, prominent 'A' and the last name "Kierig" follows in a similar cursive script.

Andrew Kierig
Co-Chair and Virginia Representative