

Riders' Advisory Council

January 8, 2020

Members Present:

Colin Reusch, Chair, At-Large
Andrew Kierig, Vice Chair, Virginia
Wil White, Vice Chair, Maryland
Rob Cavese, At-Large
Katherine Kortum, District of Columbia
Rebekah Mason, Maryland
Pat Sheehan, At-Large/Accessibility Advisory Committee Representative

Staff/Other Individuals Present:

John Pasek, Assistant Board Secretary, Metro

Call to Order:

Mr. Reusch called the January 2020 meeting of the Riders' Advisory Council to order at 6:05 p.m.

Approval of Agenda:

The agenda was approved without objection.

FY2021 Proposed Budget:

Mr. Pasek provided an update on the revised FY2021 budget timeline. He explained that since the RAC's previous meeting in early December, the Board had deferred action to approve a docket of items to take out to public hearings. He said that this deferral was to allow the jurisdictions more time to review some of the proposals in the budget, specifically the proposed bus service changes. He noted that any proposed additions to what was in the General Manager's budget that Board members provided in December were also expected be taken out to public hearing, pending a Board vote on January 16th. Mr. Pasek added that any additional proposals for bus route changes were due to be provided to Metro by January 6th, and that those proposals were still being reviewed by staff. He said that at this evening's meeting, he hoped to review the budget proposals and identify areas where the RAC would benefit from talking to subject matter experts, either from Bus Planning or Metro's budget office.

Ms. Kortum noted that one of the additional budget scenarios suggested by Board members called for Metro to run all eight-car trains and asked whether that was even possible. Mr. Pasek said that this would eventually be possible, though Metro doesn't currently have sufficient railcars to run all eight-car trains. He added that while Metro isn't required to take

this particular item out for public hearings, Board members wanted to take this out to the public out to get their feedback. He added that several items listed don't require public hearings, but Board members were interested in getting public feedback on some of these proposals.

Mr. Pasek noted that another one of the scenarios suggested by Board members, charging peak fares for late-night (after midnight) service, was also put on the docket not because any Board members advocated doing so, but because they wanted to hear the public's thoughts on the matter. He said that Metro used to charge peak fares after midnight, but no longer did so.

In response to a question from Ms. Kortum, Mr. Pasek told Council members that staff is developing revenue and ridership projections for the additional budget proposals put forward by members of the Board. He said that he would provide that information to members of the RAC once it's posted online.

Mr. Kierig provided more information on the proposal for Metro to run all eight-car trains as was put forward in its Proposed FY2020 budget.

Mr. Pasek then reviewed the additional budget scenarios put forward by Board members:

- If Metrorail service hours are extended, then eliminate late-night bus trips that were added when Metrorail service hours were reduced;
- Create additional one-day or three-day passes to cover either short trips or trips only off-peak or on weekends with lower prices than the current \$14 One-Day Pass;
- \$1 fare surcharge for trips to/from the Dulles Airport station excluding trips taken using an unlimited ride pass;
- A higher weekend flat fare (up to \$2.75 vs. the proposed \$2);
- A lower maximum fare during rush hour (\$6.50 vs. the proposed \$7), with a higher rush hour base fare (\$2.50 vs. the proposed \$2.35).

Mr. Sheehan asked what was proposed for MetroAccess fares as part of the budget. Mr. Pasek said that none of the proposed amendments affected MetroAccess fares, and that the existing \$6.50 cap on MetroAccess fares would remain the same. He added that the proposed increase in the discount to transfer between bus and rail (from \$0.50 to \$2.00) could result in less-expensive MetroAccess trips, given how those fares are calculated.

Mr. Cavese said that it's difficult to determine what Metro is trying to achieve with its budget proposals. Mr. Pasek responded that the General Manager's proposed budget tried to increase ridership while remaining within Metro's legislatively-mandated subsidy growth cap – limiting fare increases to rush hour, when demand is greatest; keeping off-peak fares the same and lowering weekend fares, when Metro has extra capacity; increasing the bus/rail transfer discount, to encourage bus ridership; reducing the price of the weekly bus pass to encourage ridership; and keeping the price of unlimited ride passes at current (FY2020) levels.

Ms. Kortum said that she thought it was interesting that the GM's budget proposal tries to incentivize ridership given that the recently-ratified union contracts also give incentives for increasing ridership.

Ms. Kortum said that she wanted to know the Board's thoughts on the 25¢ cash surcharge. Mr. Pasek said that he wasn't aware of any discussion on this topic during the committee meeting where these proposals were approved for public hearings.

In response to a question from Mr. Sheehan, Mr. Pasek said that public hearings are all planned for the week of February 24th.

Ms. Mason asked whether the amendments would be further explained before they're voted on by the Board. Mr. Pasek said that once the Board approves public hearing items, including amendments, those items would be included in the outreach materials. He noted that there is general agreement among Board members that all of the proposed amendments would be included in what would be taken out to public hearings.

Mr. Cavese said that the weekend flat fare proposal was costliest in terms of revenue/ridership and that he would be interested in more analysis of different flat fare proposals. There was further discussion about the cumulative impact of the proposals on ridership.

Mr. White said that he wasn't sure if the 25¢ cash surcharge on Metrobus fares would actually speed service because it would require people to fumble for extra change. Mr. Reusch said that he didn't think that the cash surcharge would result in speedier trips. Ms. Kortum said that she's like to see a demonstration that this proposal is the best way to achieve operational efficiency.

Mr. Kierig noted that the proposed 25¢ surcharge came up at a recent discussion on bus service, and that in order for such a surcharge to be effective, there needs to be sufficient off-board locations for people to add value to their SmarTrip cards. Ms. Kortum added that if Metro is going to make it more expensive to add value to one's SmarTrip card on the bus, then it needs to expand the options to add value to one's SmarTrip card off the bus. There was further discussion about the availability of retail locations for riders to add value to their SmarTrip cards.

Ms. Mason said that she was trying to determine the aim of the proposed cash surcharge – whether it was to speed buses, or to eliminate cash on buses. She said that she thinks that this proposal will have a greater impact on more vulnerable populations and wanted to know if there are machines where people could load cash off-board at bus stops. Members noted that such options exist in other cities, but not yet in the Washington area. Mr. Keirig added that upgraded bus stops along Columbia Pike in Arlington will be wired for payment machines, but their installation will likely depend on WMATA.

Mr. Reusch said that the proposal to charge extra for cash payment is clear in its aim – both to speed bus trips and to disincentivize paying cash, though it also raises equity issues and questions about the policy’s overall utility.

Mr. Sheehan said that Metro has announced that it would be accepting new payment methods in the coming year, including payment by mobile phone app.

Mr. Reusch said that it’s clear that the RAC is interested in further analysis and justification on all of the proposals, and was specifically interested in more information on:

- Proposed bus route changes
- Fare changes/increases – including analysis of the proposals
- What is meant by “improvements to customer service” and how the proposed \$2.5 million budget increase for these improvements would be allotted

Ms. Mason said that she is also interested in the proposed changes to late-night bus service if late-night rail service is restored. She said that she isn’t convinced that restored rail service will be able to serve as a replacement for the eliminated bus service, since they may serve different markets.

Ms. Kortum asked whether the low-income fare pilot was included in the proposed FY2021 budget. Mr. Pasek said that this is a reimbursable project that was funded by the District of Columbia, so it was outside of Metro’s budget process.

Mr. Cavese noted that the revenue changes in the budget proposal are dwarfed by the amount Metro says it loses from fare evasion and said that he was interested in seeing more detailed information on instances of fare evasion, such as the amount of revenue that Metro loses from malfunctioning or inoperable fare collection equipment. Mr. Reusch asked whether it was too late to include a budget proposal that would allot funding to ensure that all fare collection machines are operable. Mr. Pasek said that such a proposal wouldn’t need to go through the public hearing process as outlined in the Metro Compact, so the RAC could make that suggestion to the Board at any point in the budget process.

Mr. White noted that, in his experience, there are a significant number of people who load \$2 on their SmarTrip card on the bus, which slows down the bus.

Mr. Kierig said that he would be interested in hearing from Bus Planning staff, specifically how staff is justifying significant Metrobus service reductions given continued declines in bus ridership.

Ms. Mason noted that, in the past, the RAC had talked about doing its own outreach, and discussed the idea of the RAC reaching out and engaging directly with customers. Mr. Reusch said that members should feel empowered to interact with customers and the more input RAC members get from the public, the better. Mr. Pasek said that he would work with staff to get

RAC members outreach materials, but that he wanted to make sure that feedback was also submitted to Metro so that it will be included in the official public hearing record.

Mr. Kierig discussed the communication shortcomings around the December 2019 schedule changes.

Mr. Pasek explained that Metro staff is still developing budget materials and those will be provided prior to the opening of the public comment period on or about February 8th.

Mr. Sheehan said that he thinks that people are looking for fare simplification, but it's not clear from the budget proposals whether or not that is being proposed. He said that Metro needs to explain not only what is being proposed in terms of fare changes, but also why those changes are being proposed.

Ms. Mason asked whether one of the guests at an upcoming RAC meeting could be someone who develops Metro's outreach materials and who can explain the rationale behind Metro's budget proposals. Mr. Pasek said that the staff that develops Metro's outreach materials is not necessarily the staff who could explain the reasoning behind the proposals, but that he would also ask outreach staff to attend an upcoming RAC meeting.

Mr. Pasek then provided an overview of the budget timeline. He explained that the Board would approve a proposal of items to take out to public hearing on January 16th, and then staff would develop budget and outreach materials based on that proposal. He said that on February 8th, the website and online survey would be live, the outreach materials would be printed, and the outreach plan would be finalized, and that the public comment period would be open and remain open until March 2nd.

Mr. Pasek noted that the RAC's next meeting is scheduled for February 5th, and that staff could come to that meeting to provide more information on bus and rail service proposals, fare proposals, and outreach, which would give the RAC time to develop comments before the Board adopts the budget in early April. Mr. Reusch said that the RAC may also want to have a work session on the budget in mid- to late February.

In response to a question from Mr. Sheehan, Mr. Pasek explained that the public comment period would close on March 2nd, and that the Finance committee would review the proposal at the end of March, with final budget approval in early April. He noted that the RAC, as an advisory body to the Board, could submit its comments on the budget to the Board after the comment period closes.

Mr. Reusch laid out a timeline for the RAC's deliberations on the budget:

- Members would get more information on proposed budget items the following week, in advance of the January 16th Finance Committee and Board meetings;
- Additional information would be provided after Board approval of a public hearing docket on January 16th;

- The RAC would have a discussion with subject matter experts at its February 5th meeting;
- The RAC could decide to have an ad hoc meeting to develop specific budget recommendations by early March.

Members agreed to this timeline to provide FY2021 budget comments.

Blue/Orange/Silver Lines Capacity and Reliability Study

Mr. Kierig gave an overview of concepts proposed at community meetings as part of the Blue/Orange/Silver Lines Capacity and Reliability Study. These options included:

- Additional turnback locations for trains along the Orange/Silver lines;
- Building a connector to allow inbound Orange/Silver Line trains to continue on to the outbound Blue Line and vice versa;
- New Blue Line connections from Rosslyn – either north towards Tenleytown or east across DC towards Union Station;
- Creating a Blue/Yellow Line loop around downtown DC;
- Creating new Silver Line connections north of I-66;
- Creating new Silver Line connections south of I-66, via Route 7 and Columbia Pike;
- Operational improvements including new pocket tracks, reconfigured train seating, enhance station connections, core station expansions, improved train control and enhanced bus service in parallel corridors.

Mr. Kierig noted that the restoration of automatic train operation was not included in the list of proposals and felt that it absolutely should have been. He said that the study group's next meeting was scheduled for February 11th, when the advisory group would receive a briefing on the feedback received at the public meetings.

Ms. Kortum asked whether the study was coordinating with the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (COG) or any other jurisdictions. Mr. Kierig said that there is active engagement by COG on the steering committee as well as participation from the District of Columbia and other jurisdictions.

In response to a question from Ms. Mason, Mr. Kierig said that he felt that reconfiguring train seating was a red herring because previous Metro studies have shown that this doesn't increase capacity as much as providing open-gangway trains or increasing the number of doors per train car.

Mr. Sheehan asked about the timeline for the 8000 Series railcar order. Mr. Pasek said that he would need to check with staff for a timeline.

New Business:

Ms. Mason asked about the status of filling the current vacancies on the Council. Mr. Pasek said that he would welcome additional applicants and asked that members direct potential members to the online application form.

In response to a question about the ongoing Transdev strike, Mr. Pasek said that the parties had requested that a federal mediator attend the next negotiating session, which was scheduled for January 14th. There was further discussion about the status of negotiations and whether Metro was collecting penalties from Transdev for not providing the service it was under contract to provide.

Mr. Kierig noted that he will be attending the January 16th meeting of the Northern Virginia Transportation Commission (NVTC) and will be providing comments on behalf of bus riders affected by the Transdev strike.

Adjournment:

Without objection, Mr. Reusch adjourned the meeting at 7:59 p.m.