

Riders' Advisory Council

April 2, 2025

Members Present:

Cole Staudt, Chair
Solomon Chen, Vice Chair/Virginia
Ali Siddiqi, Vice Chair/Maryland
Solomon Chen
Matthew Clark
Eli Craveiro Frankel
Lucas Habosky
Alex Mendelsohn
Brian Meyer
Patrick Sheehan
Thomas Shepard
Irene Stephens
Hendeke Tafesse
William Way
Brandon Wu
William Way

Staff Present:

Erica Cunningham, Vice President, Community Relations and Outreach, Metro
Allison Davis, Senior Vice President, Planning and Program Development, Metro
Kareen ElBeyrouly, Director, Rail Operations Scheduling, Metro
Al Himes, Director, Bus Service Planning and Scheduling, Metro

Bryna Helfer, Alternate Director/RAC Board Liaison
John Pasek, Deputy Board Secretary, Metro
José Reyes, Board Program Manager, Metro

Call to Order/Approval of Agenda/Introductions:

Chair Staudt called the April meeting of the Riders' Advisory Council (RAC) to order at 6:09 p.m. He noted that several newly-appointed members of the RAC were present and had all members introduce themselves.

Mr. Staudt moved to approve the agenda with the following changes: removal of the approval of minutes and the update from the General Manager/CEO items and moving RAC officer elections up to Item IV. The agenda was approved without objection as amended.

Public Comment:

There were no comments from members of the public.

Better Bus Implementation Update:

Mr. Himes provided the Council with an update on Metro's plans for an overhaul of its bus network, known as "Better Bus." He explained that changes would be launching on June 29, 2025 and noted that Metro will need assistance in getting the word out to customers about the changes taking place. Mr. Himes added that, with the June changes, Metro will be the largest transit agency implementing an overhaul of its entire network. He then reviewed the timeline of actions Metro has already completed, including writing schedules, assigning operators to shifts and training staff on the new routes, and provided an overview of upcoming activities, including installation of new bus stop flags and maps and more intense customer outreach.

Ms. Cunningham then reviewed Metro's outreach activities to date and explained that in April, Metro will begin more promotional activities around the Better Bus network to get customers ready for the June launch. She said that Metro will focus in-person outreach in June and provide community research to help riders learn about the new network, and then will focus on outreach to students in July and August to prepare students for their return to school. Ms. Cunningham noted that outreach materials, such as an online trip planner, neighborhood profiles and maps would be available later in April and in May. She explained that the goal of the outreach materials is to connect riders with tools and resources to help them navigate the redesigned system.

Mr. Himes said that Metro has been installing new bus stop signs since early March and have completed installation throughout most of Virginia. He added that Metro is also developing maps for each rail station which will go to print and be installed later in the process. Mr. Himes noted that the process involves a lot of coordination with Metro's jurisdictional partners, including roadway changes to accommodate buses and changes to bus stops. He added that Metro is partnering with Prince George's County transit in the network redesign, including transferring some surplus buses to the county. He noted that, internally, Metro is conducting training for its bus operators on the new routes so that they understand the network, as well as ensuring that Metro's digital systems are updated to provide information about the new network. Mr. Himes explained that some activities will continue after the June 29th launch of the new network, including bus stop improvements and outreach to students who will return to school in late August.

In response to a question from Mr. Staudt, Ms. Cunningham said that RAC members can be most helpful once the outreach toolkit is rolled out at the end of April; RAC members can share that toolkit with their networks. She added that, closer to the rollout of the new network, RAC members can participate in ride-along outreach events and, after participating in training, can participate in other outreach activities.

Mr. Staudt also asked about how the service changes will be reflected in apps and online rider information and whether riders will be able to search for trips on the new network prior to the June launch. Mr. Himes responded that there is a more thorough process for providing information to third-party apps and noted that Metro's own Trip Planner will be available around six weeks sooner for riders to begin planning their trips.

Mr. Mendelsohn asked whether there will be full schedules available so that riders can see comprehensive information about their new routes. Mr. Himes said that PDF schedules will be available, either to print or to request from Metro, but Metro won't be printing full timetables for large-scale physical distribution. Mr. Himes added that the full timetables will be available later than the Trip Planner and that he didn't have an exact timeframe for when those would be ready.

Mr. Chen asked about the schedule for installing new bus stop flags and the strategy for installing those flags. Mr. Himes explained that Metro is working through each section of the system to be as efficient as possible with installation. He noted that installations in Virginia are almost complete and that installation in DC will begin in Wards 7 and 8. In response to a follow-up question from Mr. Chen, Mr. Himes said that the temporary bus stop flags are designed to last at least a couple of years, and that the flags currently being installed will be up for at least a year.

Mr. Meyer noted that the Better Bus project has been underway for several years and that he was glad that it was reaching the implementation stage. He noted that this has been a significant effort and that he appreciated all of the efforts staff has put into the planning and outreach process.

Mr. Way said that he felt the communications roll-out is thoughtfully designed and asked about the number of Metrobuses that were transferred to Prince George's County. Mr. Himes responded that ten Metrobuses were transferred to the County to address their fleet needs and that these buses weren't required for Metro to operate its service. Mr. Way also asked about Metro's plans to gather feedback after implementation of the new network. Mr. Himes said that Metro will be taking feedback once the new network is implemented, both in the weeks and months after rollout of the new network. He said that he expected that service changes will be an iterative process and that Metro wants to make adjustments and improvements as a continuous process, to address any concerns in a deliberate way.

Mr. Habosky asked about plans for organizational or place-based outreach at places like senior housing, schools, etc. Ms. Cunningham said that Metro reaches about 2700 people through its "Metro Message" community conversations, which includes large apartment complexes, school districts and other groups. She noted that email communications have proven effective, and Metro has refined its strategy for virtual meetings to increase participation. Ms. Cunningham added that Metro relies on trusted partners, such as representatives of faith-based communities, to spread information. She said that Metro is prepared to fill in any gaps in communication about the new network and that Metro is being

intentional on not solely relying on social media for all of its communications. She compared the planned communications efforts to those employed for summer shutdowns and said that Metro is open to suggestions for outreach locations. In response to a follow-up question from Mr. Habosky about “Day One” of the new network, Ms. Cunningham said that Metro will have flyers to hand out, along with adopt-a-stop activities with employees and community partners stationed to assist customers.

Ms. Tafesse asked how Metro is incorporating community feedback, like the feedback provided by retirement communities, on the proposed changes. She said she wanted to know how Metro would address those kind of comments and when Metro might be able to address those concerns – would it need to wait until after the June 29th implementation? Mr. Himes explained that the network being implemented in June is what the Board approved in November, and that Metro will make adjustments following implementation, while ensuring that it most effectively uses its limited resources.

Dr. Helfer asked when the outreach toolkit will be ready. Ms. Cunningham said that the outreach toolkit should be out by the end of the month or in early May at the latest. She said that, in the interim, she can share social media posts and other information.

Mr. Staudt thanked members of the team for coming and said he looked forward to seeing them at the following month’s meeting.

FY2026 Budget Update and Service Changes:

Mr. Staudt noted that there have been some changes to Metro’s Proposed FY2026 budget asked staff to review those changes so that the RAC can incorporate those into its comments on the budget.

Ms. Davis noted that Metrobus changes were already covered as part of the Better Bus presentation. Ms. ElBeyrouty provided an overview of the rail service changes planned as part of Metro’s proposed Fiscal Year 2026 budget, which begins on July 1st, including: a longer weekend span of service (6 a.m. – 2 a.m.); additional Red and Silver Line service to address crowding; splitting Silver Line service between New Carrollton and Largo; and finally, extending half of Yellow Line trains to Greenbelt, which has been deferred until December 2025 due to budgetary reasons. She noted that this proposal was to provide additional access to destinations for riders on a heavily-used portion of the system.

Ms. Davis added that there are no fare changes proposed in the FY2026 budget, though Metro will launch open payment, allowing riders to pay with their contactless credit card. In response to a question from Mr. Siddiqi, she said that riders will also be able to use credit cards stored on their phone for payment.

Mr. Staudt asked why the extension of some Yellow Line service is being pushed back until December. Ms. ElBeyrouty noted that this change would save Metro about \$3 million and

that the proposed change, once implemented, will drive ridership by providing access to additional destinations without riders needing to transfer.

Mr. Staudt also asked about fleet plans for the Silver Line – noting that 7000-Series trains provide more real-time customer information and would help Silver Line riders ensure that they're on the correct train depending on which branch of the Silver Line they want to ride. Ms. ElBeyrouty said that there aren't specific assignments by train type but noted that a solid communications will be critical to ensure that riders know which train to board and those plans are being worked on in advance of the change.

Mr. Craveiro Frankel asked about Metro's planned communications around its Tap.Ride.Go. contactless credit card payment, specifically how Metro will remind riders that the need to tap to both enter and exit the rail system, which is different than in other cities. Ms. Davis said that Metro will need to tailor its communications plans to reach riders, especially at stations that are heavily used by visitors, who would likely take advantage of this technology.

Mr. Shepherd asked about the rollout of contactless payments to Metrobus and other bus operators. Ms. Davis noted that Metro would be rolling out contactless payments by mode and would be starting with Metrorail because it's the service most heavily-used by visitors, who are less likely to have a SmarTrip card. She added that once contactless payments are rolled out on rail, Metro will then pivot to Metrobus and, finally, parking. Mr. Mendelsohn added that Metro will need to clearly communicate to Metrobus customers that contactless payment won't be available until after it's implemented on Metrorail.

Mr. Staudt thanked staff for their presentation and told Council members he wanted to shift the discussion to any comments the RAC had on Metro's budget that they want to communicate to the Board. He noted that Metro is in a much better place this year than it was last year, and while he'd like to see additional service, he understands Metro's need to contain costs.

Mr. Meyer noted that, in its comments on the budget, the RAC needs to be vigilant about Metro maintaining sustainable operating budgets, and noted that Metro's farebox recovery ratio, while better than what was budgeted this year, is still below pre-pandemic levels. Mr. Chen said that he agreed with Mr. Meyer's comments and added that Metro needs to be cautious regarding future budgets.

Mr. Habosky asked if the RAC should add in a comment that, while the RAC supports Metro's FY2026 budget, whether it should also call on Metro to find options for long-term funding. Mr. Staudt said that he wasn't opposed to including those comments, and Council members agreed to include this comment. Mr. Staudt said that he hoped to communicate the RAC's position on Metro's budget in the next week so that Board members will have this information well in advance of their voting on the budget.

RAC Leadership Elections:

Mr. Staudt explained that the Council holds its annual elections each April and that the RAC elects a Chair and two Vice Chairs, such that all three jurisdictions are represented. He noted that At-Large members were eligible to serve in leadership positions; their position is based on their jurisdiction of residence. He gave an overview of the duties of the Chair, including running meetings, providing reports at Board meetings and working with staff to set agendas. Dr. Helfer noted that the RAC's success has been influenced by its executive committee members working closely with each other and with Board members.

Mr. Staudt said would first open the floor to nominations for Chair, which would then determine the jurisdictions for the Vice Chairs.

Chair:

Mr. Staudt opened the floor to nominations for the position of Chair. Mr. Clark nominated Mr. Staudt to serve as Chair for the April 2025 – April 2026 term. Mr. Meyer seconded this nomination. After asking for any additional nominations for the position of Chair, Mr. Staudt closed the floor to nominations. The RAC elected Mr. Staudt Chair by unanimous consent.

Maryland Vice Chair:

Mr. Staudt noted that, since he lives in the District of Columbia, the Vice Chairs would need to be residents of Maryland and Virginia. Mr. Staudt gave an overview of the responsibilities of a Vice Chair and opened the floor to nominations for the position of Maryland Vice Chair. Mr. Staudt nominated Mr. Siddiqi to serve as Maryland Vice Chair for the April 2025 – April 2026 term. Mr. Clark seconded this nomination. After asking for any additional nominations for the position of Chair, Mr. Staudt closed the floor to nominations. The RAC elected Mr. Siddiqi Maryland Vice Chair by unanimous consent.

Virginia Vice Chair:

Mr. Staudt opened the floor to nominations for the position of Virginia Vice Chair. Mr. Meyer nominated Mr. Chen to serve as Virginia Vice Chair for the April 2025 – April 2026 term. Mr. Habosky seconded this nomination. Mr. Clark nominated Mr. Way to serve as Virginia Vice Chair for the April 2025 – April 2026 term. Mr. Staudt seconded this nomination. After asking for any additional nominations for the position of Chair, Mr. Staudt closed the floor to nominations and gave each candidate the opportunity to make remarks. The RAC elected Mr. Way as the Virginia Vice Chair by a vote of eight to six.

RAC Annual Report:

Mr. Staudt then turned the floor over to Mr. Wu to review the draft of the RAC's Annual Report. Mr. Wu explained that the RAC's Annual Report, while not a scientific sample, is a designed to get a good cross-section of riders' concerns, potential solutions to those concerns, and any positive developments with Metro that they have noticed. He thanked members who gathered feedback from riders and those who helped with drafting the report.

Mr. Wu then reviewed the draft report with the Council, section-by-section, including the top seven concerns expressed by riders and proposed solutions to address these concerns.

Related to the report's recommendation to provide updates on the status of all-door boarding under "Increasing Frequencies & Reducing Delays on Metrobus," Mr. Staudt noted that he hasn't seen any signage on buses indicating the ability for all-door boarding. Mr. Mendelsohn noted that there are opportunities to allow all-door boarding at high-volume stops. Mr. Wu said that he would add a note in this section referencing better deployment of all-door boarding on high-volume routes.

As part of its recommendation to increase Metro Lift enrollment under "Tackling Metrobus Metrorail Fare Evasion," Ms. Stephens asked that Metro work with community partners regarding outreach to SNAP recipients. Mr. Craveiro Frankel suggested adding language to ensure that the enrollment process for Metro Lift is easy-to-understand. Mr. Wu said that he would make both changes.

Mr. Staudt gave an overview of the process for the RAC to approve the report and to present it to the Board. Mr. Wu said he would make the updates requested and have a final report ready within the next week. Mr. Staudt moved conditional approval of the Annual Report, pending incorporation of members' comments. Mr. Habosky seconded this motion. This motion was approved unanimously.

Outreach/Member Report Out:

Mr. Staudt then opened the floor to any members who wanted to share any feedback they've received from riders recently.

Mr. Way noted that Metro seems to be handling the increase in ridership as a result of Return-to-Office (RTO) policies. He added that he hasn't heard any concerns about Automatic Train Operation since that was reinstated on the Red Line. Mr. Craveiro Frankel said that, with RTO, there have been some concerns about rider etiquette and the need for Public Service Announcements to encourage better rider behavior.

Mr. Shepherd noted that Metro was overwhelmed by the volume of riders over the weekend going downtown to see the cherry blossoms and that there may need to be better preparations for this event next year. Mr. Mendelsohn said he heard concerns about service raised online from riders on the Blue/Orange/Silver Lines. He said he'd like to see an analysis of what could be done to make things go more smoothly, especially in advance of other big events coming to DC. Mr. Staudt said that he expects the GM/CEO to provide a readout to the Board and he'll report back with any information.

Mr. Staudt adjourned the meeting at 8:11 p.m.