

Riders' Advisory Council

February 6, 2019

Members Present:

Katherine Kortum, Chair, District of Columbia
J. Clarence Flanders, Vice Chair, At-Large
Lorraine Silva, Vice Chair, Virginia
Valerie Cook, District of Columbia
Rebekah Mason, Maryland
Pat Sheehan, At-Large/Accessibility Advisory Committee representative
Yvette Washington, Maryland
Wil White, Maryland

Other Individuals Present:

Christian Dorsey, Member, WMATA Board of Directors (via phone)
Julie Hershorn, Assistant Director, Bus Planning and Scheduling, Metro
Lora Byala, FourSquare ITP
John Pasek, Assistant Board Secretary, Metro

Call to Order:

Ms. Kortum called the February meeting of the Riders' Advisory Council to order at 6:05 p.m.

Approval of Minutes:

The minutes of the January 2, 2019 Riders' Advisory Council meeting were approved without objection.

Bus Transformation Project:

Julie Hershorn from Metro's Office of Bus Planning and Scheduling introduced Lora Byala, the head of FourSquare ITP, the consultant working on the regional Bus Transformation Project study. Ms. Byala provided background on the study, including the challenges facing bus service in the region, the goals for regional bus service as put forward by stakeholders, and the stakeholder engagement conducted as part of the study.

Ms. Byala also shared the findings from the study's survey of bus riders, including why they currently ride the bus, barriers to their riding the bus and their priorities for investments in better bus service. Finally, Ms. Byala outlined the project's next steps and schedule, noting that draft strategies would be presented to the public in the late spring/early summer and then developing a road map for bus service in the region over the next ten years

Ms. Kortum noted that some survey respondents said that bus service had gotten more reliable, while others said that bus service had gotten less reliable and asked whether there was

a correlation between their responses and the routes they ride. Ms. Byala said that the survey did not ask respondents which routes they took, so while the project team has data on bus route reliability, it can't correlate that data with rider survey responses.

Ms. Cook asked whether increased interest in and attention to climate change could serve as a motivating factor for people to use the bus and noted that there wasn't anything mentioned about this in the study. Ms. Byala said that the study hasn't looked into how to market bus service yet, rather its focus right now is on improving service to make it more attractive to riders. She said that the next step, once service is improved, is how to get more people to use the bus, and that marketing its environmental benefits could be a part of that strategy.

Mr. Flanders noted that as people become more familiar with the bus network, they are more likely to ride the bus, and ride the bus more frequently. Ms. Byala noted that improving people's ability to understand the bus network is one of the issues that needs to be addressed as part of the roadmap. Mr. Flanders explained that the people that he knows have a preference for Uber or the streetcar over buses. In response to a question from Ms. Hershorn, Mr. Flanders explained that for many people, buses are OK for trips that they take regularly, but for special trips, people are more likely to use a rideshare service. He added that the people he knows are less likely to take the bus for trips outside of their neighborhood or areas with which they're familiar.

Ms. Silva noted that people prefer Uber because it provides door-to-door service, or prefer the streetcar or Metrorail because those provide frequent service, while bus frequency can be an issue, with some routes only running every 30 minutes, and that buses have to contend with external factors such as traffic, which makes it more difficult them to keep to schedule. Mr. Flanders noted that prioritizing buses on the road would help with reliability. Ms. Byala explained that the study is working on both issues, bus priority and on matching the service provided with demand. She said that some routes may only be able to support buses that come every 30 minutes, and that areas that can only support once-every-thirty-minute bus service may need other transit options that better suit them.

Mr. White noted that one of the biggest challenges with the bus is payment, which slows down service. Ms. Hershorn said that while she thinks Metro will eventually eliminate cash payment, in order to accommodate everyone Metrobus will not be getting rid of cash payment options any time soon.

In response to question from Mr. White about other bus systems doing studies similar to the Bus Transformation Project, Ms. Byala noted that many cities are redesigning their bus networks, including Columbus, Houston and Baltimore, and there are ongoing studies in Los Angeles, Hampton Roads and other places. She noted that what's different about the Washington, DC region is that it has so many different bus operators, and the study has to figure out what works best for all of them.

Ms. Silva said that she has always used Metrobus, but Metro keeps cutting routes where she lives, with these routes being taken over by ART (Arlington Transit). Ms. Hershorn noted that some of the service transitions from Metrobus to ART was at Arlington County's discretion, because in some cases, they can provide the service more cheaply. She added that as regional bus services have grown, the jurisdictions have taken a greater role in determining which routes they would operate and which routes Metro should operate, sometimes choosing to have Metro operate routes which are more resource-intensive. She said that the study will help the region make regional, strategic decisions about how to best provide bus service.

Ms. Silva noted that she purchased her home based on accessibility to transit, only to have Metro discontinue the bus route two years later, though ART ended up taking over the route because of pressure from members of the public. She said that Metro needs to work in closer coordination with regional bus service providers as part of its decision-making.

Ms. Kortum asked whether any of the recommendations from the Bus Transformation Project will be operational, specifically operational changes to improve bus speeds, or whether the recommendations will only be strategic. Ms. Hershorn explained that some of the recommendations will include operational changes, such as Transit Signal Priority and bus-only lanes. Ms. Byala added that there will be operational strategies identified as part of the study's "road map," which would then be individually studied and piloted later. Ms. Kortum noted that many of the operational changes require partnership with local jurisdictions, while others are wholly within WMATA's control.

Ms. Cook discussed her commute options and noted that she has made the decision to use different routes for her trips based on her perception of safety and specific bus stops or locations. She added that is another example of factors not wholly within Metro's control. Ms. Cook asked what kind of technological options the study is reviewing as part of the project. Ms. Byala said that some of the options being considered are different fare collection strategies such as cashless bus routes and subsidized trips on transportation network companies (TNCs) such as Uber and Lyft to get riders to transit. Ms. Hershorn gave an example of technology Metro is using to ensure headway management on the Georgia Avenue corridor – drivers are provided information about the location of other buses on the route, which allows them to make adjustments to maintain consistent spacing between buses. Ms. Hershorn added that Metro is also looking at electric buses, though not necessarily driverless vehicles.

Mr. Flanders asked about Metro's plans to partner with other transportation options, such as bikeshare services. Ms. Byala said that the study isn't getting into specific detail about bikeshare stations as Mr. Flanders described, though these issues are already part of the jurisdictions' planning process.

Mr. Sheehan noted that attendees at the previous evening's public hearing spoke about "transit deserts" – locations where there isn't sufficient access to fixed-route transit. He asked whether the study was looking at these areas, and noted that areas without sufficient fixed-route services leads to increased reliance on paratransit. He said that public hearing attendees also

discussed the need for robust transit service. Mr. Sheehan also explained that the paratransit service area mirrors the service area of fixed-route transit, so any bus route discontinuances affect the paratransit service area. He added that Metro has agreed to mitigate the effects of bus route changes or cancellation on paratransit users.

Mr. Sheehan also described his recent experience using an autonomous vehicle at National Harbor, especially noting its disability access features.

Ms. Hershorn said that the study has been working closely with MetroAccess as the study progresses. Ms. Byala noted that one of the primary questions that the study is trying to answer is “Where does the bus make sense?” and conversely, in which situations, might other options make sense.

Ms. Washington described her experiences as a bus rider and shared her concerns about buses’ consistency, specifically instances of buses leaving before their scheduled departure times. She also explained that many buses, especially those in Maryland, only operate hourly outside of peak periods.

Ms. Silva noted the need for better technological coordination between different bus operators, citing the example of different transit operators using different GPS/bus tracking technology.

Ms. Kortum thanked the presenters and said that it would be great to hear from the project at future milestones.

Approval of January 2, 2019 Minutes:

Ms. Cook moved, seconded by Ms. Silva, to accept minutes of the January 2, 2019 Riders’ Advisory Council. The minutes were approved without objection.

Announcements/General Discussion:

In response to a question from Ms. Kortum, Mr. Pasek said that RAC meetings were now beginning at 6 p.m. to allow for participation by Mr. Dorsey, the Board’s liaison to the RAC. Ms. Kortum noted that his participation has, thus far, been limited.

Ms. Cook suggested that the RAC should consider rearranging its agenda to allow for greater participation from Mr. Dorsey during the meeting. She said that she also thought that RAC members needed greater input on the agenda, and said that she would like to see some discussion of safety and security on the agenda in the coming months.

Ms. Washington asked whether the RAC had lost or gained any members. Ms. Kortum noted that under the new bylaws, the RAC has eleven members, with two vacancies. She said that she had expected the Board to make appointments in January, which did not happen. Mr. Pasek said that he expects the Board to make appointments in February. There was further discussion of appointments under the new bylaws.

Ms. Kortum reminded members that the RAC's elections are scheduled for April and that the group will need to select a new chair at that time, as well as vice chairs from the two other jurisdictions not represented by the chair. Ms. Kortum noted that the chair largely serves as the RAC's point person, and the vice chairs will fill in when the chair is unavailable. She also told members that due to work travel, she will not be able to attend the March and April RAC meetings, so someone else will need to chair those meetings.

Mr. White asked if there were any upcoming safety drills. Mr. Pasek said that his office has asked the Transit Police to notify them of any upcoming drills and hasn't heard of any. He said that he would need to check to see if any drills were scheduled.

FY2020 Budget Hearings:

Ms. Kortum asked whether any members attended any of the recent budget public hearings.

Mr. Sheehan told the group that he attended the February 5th budget hearing. He said that there was an issue about the lack of sign language interpretation services at the hearing, and Metro will be taking a look at its policy on this issue. Mr. Sheehan said that he spoke about station lighting and that Metro shouldn't balance its budget on the backs of riders or the disabled. He said that other speakers addressed topics such as the upcoming Blue/Yellow line shutdown, bus service, fare options and lack of late-night service. Mr. Sheehan said that information was provided about proposed changes to bus passes and the Metrorail service guarantee. He said there was good turnout at the February 5th hearing, and that there were about eight people at the hearing in Greenbelt the previous week.

Ms. Silva said that only one member of the public testified at the Alexandria hearing, and he spoke about Metro's proposal to extend rush hour periods, including extending peak fare periods, and noted that extending the times that rush hour fares are charged would affect people who specifically wait until after rush hour to take the train because of the lower fare.

Mr. Sheehan said that it wasn't clear whether rush hour fares would be extended if rush hour service were extended and noted the impact on MetroAccess fares if rush hour fare periods were extended. Mr. Pasek said that the Board has the option to extend rush hour fares if it extends the periods during which trains run at peak service levels, but can also choose to leave the peak fare periods as they are now. He noted that the Board could also choose to leave service and fare levels as they are now. Mr. Pasek said that this is something that the Board will need to decide when it adopts the budget in March, and that the RAC can weigh in on this issue as part of its comments on the budget.

Mr. Sheehan said that there was also discussion of late-night service at the previous evening's hearings, with people noting that they were unable to get home from work due to the lack of late night service. Mr. Pasek noted that Metro added late-night bus service when it cut back Metrorail hours two years ago, and said that the Board needs to make a decision on Metro's hours of service. He said that, if rail service hours are extended, the additional bus service would be discontinued.

Ms. Mason said that she preferred a 6:30 p.m. meeting start time. She said that limiting Mr. Dorsey's participation to a specific portion of the meeting misses out some of the benefits of his role as Board liaison and might give him the impression that the RAC doesn't want or need his input as much as it does.

Ms. Mason also asked whether the RAC needed to do anything additional in regard to its work plan. Ms. Kortum said that the RAC provided its three priorities to the Board as part of its January report and those function as its plan for the coming year. She said that, given that the RAC isn't in complete control of the information it receives or what it's asked to do, it may not be worth developing a more-detailed work plan. She said that if the RAC gets more information on what the Board wants the RAC to do, then it might make more sense to focus on the details of its work plan. Ms. Mason said she just wanted to make sure that the RAC didn't owe the Board anything.

Ms. Kortum asked whether the RAC should discuss the budget at its March meeting. Mr. Pasek said that there will be information available at the end of February which can inform the RAC's discussion on the budget in March in order to make recommendations to the Board in advance of its adoption of the budget in March.

Mr. Flanders noted that he had questions about Metro's ad revenue and options for additional revenue and the impact those might have on Metro's budget. Ms. Kortum asked whether there had been any developments regarding concessions in stations. Mr. Pasek said that he would need to check with Metro's Real Estate office on that proposal.

Adjournment:

Without objection, the meeting was adjourned at 7:44 p.m.