

Riders' Advisory Council

March 7, 2018

Members Present:

Katherine Kortum, Chair, District of Columbia
J. Clarence Flanders, District of Columbia Vice Chair
Bob Fogel, Maryland Vice Chair
Lorraine Silva, Virginia Vice Chair
Valerie Cook, District of Columbia
Sietse Goffard, District of Columbia
Deborah MacKenzie, Virginia
Rebekah Mason, Maryland
Paul Meissner, Virginia
Colin Reusch, At-Large
Patrick Sheehan, At-Large/Accessibility Advisory Committee Representative
Joseph Suh, District of Columbia
Yvette Washington, Maryland
Wil White, Maryland

Other Individuals Present:

Christian Dorsey, WMATA Board of Directors – Arlington County
Kathy Porter, WMATA Board of Directors – Montgomery County
Jennifer Ellison, Board Corporate Secretary
John Pasek, Assistant Board Secretary
Robert Relyea, WMATA Office of Rail Transportation

Call to Order:

Ms. Kortum called the March 2018 meeting of the Riders' Advisory Council to order at 6:34 p.m.

Approval of the Agenda:

The agenda was approved as presented without objection.

Approval of Minutes:

The minutes were approved without objection, with changes to note that Ms. Silva was not present at the February RAC meeting and to correct the date of the meeting to February 7th. Mr. Flanders, Mr. Fogel, Ms. Silva, and Ms. Washington abstained from voting on the minutes.

Public Comment Period:

Chris Barnes expressed support for the continued existence of the RAC.

Steve Kaffen said that any study Metro conducts of bus service should include the need for coordination with non-Metro-operated buses, including DC Circulator service and private bus operators. He noted issues with intercity bus operators blocking bus stops in the vicinity of Dupont Circle and the impact those operators have on Metrobus operations.

Kathy Welsh expressed concerns about Metro's user-friendliness as it relates to being able to ride Metrorail to/from Washington Nationals' baseball games. She noted that due to Metro's earlier closing times, it would be impossible for an attendee to take the Metro home from a Sunday night game that is scheduled to begin at 8 p.m. She also expressed concerns about Metro service during the events surrounding the All-Star game and said that Metro needs to be available when people need it.

Carol Allen also expressed concerns about Metro service to and from Washington Nationals games, specifically the All-Star game that is scheduled for July 2018. She said that Metro needs to stay open to accommodate the crowds of attendees at this event.

Mr. Suh noted that Metro will be suspending trackwork during All-Star Week, and that it may be worth Metro looking at extending its hours, as well. Ms. Welsh suggested that the system remain open such that attendees can at least return home from the game and said that she would be willing to pay peak fares in order for Metro to be able to provide the service.

RAC Operational Review:

Ms. Kortum introduced Board members Christian Dorsey and Kathy Porter to discuss the operational review that the Board is conducting of the RAC.

Mr. Dorsey opened the discussion and said that he recognized that the Board's operational review of the RAC had not been the most coherent process. He explained that there is no desire on the part of the Board to dissolve the RAC, but that there are a few key issues that need to be addressed in order to ensure that the RAC and RAC members are both valued and valuable. He noted that the RAC serves as an important way to bring people together in an engaged way, though there are issues including vacancies, staffing, the responsibility of the Board with regard to the RAC and the relationship between the Board, the RAC and the General Manager and his staff that need to be addressed. He said that public engagement needs to be meaningful and directed towards some specific output.

Mr. Dorsey acknowledged that the Board has done a poor job of collaborating with the Council on a work plan to direct the RAC's activities. He said that the operational review needs to be a collaborative process to address these issues.

Mr. Dorsey thanked RAC members for their work in completing the SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis of the RAC. He said that in reviewing members' responses, the following common issues were identified as needing to be addressed:

1. How to improve communication between the Board and the RAC
2. Committees and their work plans
3. RAC staff coordinator positions
4. RAC work plan

Mr. Dorsey added that the Board needs to work with the RAC on revising its bylaws, with a goal of the Board approving revised bylaws in April. He then turned the floor over to Ms. Porter.

Ms. Porter provided the Council with some information on her background, including her experience working with citizen advisory groups, both as the mayor of Takoma Park and through the regional Transportation Planning Board. She thanked the group for its responses to the SWOT analysis, and said that reading through the responses, she found that the biggest issue that needs to be addressed is around communications – the Board isn't telling the RAC what it needs from it, and the RAC isn't getting feedback on its recommendations. She said that she understand that reorganizations can be difficult for a group, but that they are useful once it has an opportunity to work through all of the issues.

Ms. Kortum noted that, based on discussion with Board members the previous week, that the Board would be acting at its March meeting to reappoint members whose terms had expired in December. She said that the Board would not be acting to appoint new members. Ms. Kortum then opened the floor to questions from RAC members.

Mr. Goffard thanked Mr. Dorsey and Ms. Porter for attending the RAC's meeting. He asked whether they had any thoughts on the ideal size for the RAC or on its structure. Mr. Dorsey said that he didn't have an exact number, but that 21 members seemed a little large, and that 15-18 may be closer to ideal. He said that the challenge is that recruitment is often driven by geography rather than experience and that he would be interested in exploring de-linking members' residence from their consideration for appointment. Ms. Porter added that she isn't approaching this issue from the idea of having an ideal number; she noted that the key seems to be improving communications and how the Board and the RAC can best work together.

Mr. Reusch thanked the Board members for their thoughtful consideration of the RAC's feedback. He said that the Board and the RAC need to figure out how they can be more responsive to one another, as well as to figure out how to formalize staff responsiveness to the Board and RAC as they each seek to carry out their missions. He noted that the RAC has had issues getting information from WMATA, and it has often been much more difficult than it should to get information from a public agency. He also expressed concern about the lack of transparency in Metro's development of new policies.

Ms. Porter asked Mr. Reusch how much he and other members of the Council knew about the work of the Board's committees. Mr. Reusch said that information isn't provided directly to the RAC, rather it is incumbent on RAC members to seek out information on what the Board is considering. Ms. Porter noted that much of the Board's work takes places at its committee meetings and these meetings represent opportunities for the RAC to get information.

Mr. Reusch noted that recent changes to Metro's refund policy and its policy on negative balances were done without input from the RAC. Ms. Porter responded that the Board didn't have any input on those policy changes either; that they were done under the authority of the General Manager. Mr. Dorsey said that there needs to be a culture change in terms of the inclusion of the RAC and the approach to it. He also noted the RAC's interaction with staff, explaining that their staff person needs to be a facilitator, and asked how staff should take direction from the RAC to complete its work. He said that part of the review process requires figuring out how to properly staff and resource the RAC.

Mr. Flanders said that he thinks the RAC is "all bark" – that it says a lot without having much of an impact. He asked whether there was a need to formalize the RAC's action and how to get the Board to incorporate the RAC's review of items in its processes. He also discussed the alignment between the Board's and the RAC's committees, and said that if there isn't a formal process for the Board to consider the RAC's input, that will lead to frustrated RAC members and result in high turnover.

Ms. MacKenzie said that the RAC's bylaws are very clear about the RAC's role in advising both the Board and staff, not just the Board, and said that she would hate to see the relationship between the RAC and Metro staff be removed from the equation. Mr. Dorsey responded that the only staff that works directly for the Board, as opposed to for the General Manager/CEO, is staff in the Office of the Inspector General and the Board Corporate Secretary's office, and added that as part of the review the relationship between the RAC and staff needs to be better defined. He said that he understands that the RAC cannot function without staff support.

Mr. Meissner noted that during the RAC review, its subcommittees aren't meeting, but there are still issues that need to be addressed, meaning that the RAC won't be able to fulfill its mission during this period. Mr. Dorsey said that he understood that the world hasn't stopped but that decision was a function of existing staff resources. He added that staffing is one of the issues that needs to be addressed as part of the review. Ms. Porter added that WMATA may not be able to provide the same level of staff support to the RAC as it previously did.

Mr. Suh said that he appreciated the members coming to the meeting and asked whether there were opportunities for streamlining and cost-saving, and where riders fit into the structure. He also asked how the RAC can be more responsive to riders and more transparent. Ms. Porter said that RAC members contribute their time and one of the considerations of the review is needing to ensure that contribution is valued. Mr. Dorsey noted that the RAC's role as a convener of public information-gathering needs to be explored in greater depth as part of the review.

Ms. Mason noted that everyone on the Council supports Metro and wants to see the system improve. She noted that members have partners that can provide valuable input and what they need is direction from the Board and assurances that the input that the RAC collects is valued.

She added that it is encouraging to know that the Board is listening and wants to be able to engage with the issues.

Ms. Kortum noted that the Accessibility Advisory Committee is considered to be useful and that it has more direct communication with staff. She asked what the AAC is doing well and if there are any best practices that it employs. Ms. Porter noted that the AAC has a more-focused mission, which makes it easier for it to provide relevant feedback. Mr. Sheehan also noted that the AAC has the ability to look at issues from a more operational standpoint than the RAC may be able to. He said that the groups work well together and work collaboratively.

Mr. Fogel noted that the RAC reacts to rumors and proposals and often develops its own recommendations. He said that he thinks it might be useful to refer the RAC's recommendations to the Board's committees, and that it might be easier to build both formal and informal relationships between the Board's and RAC's committees rather than between the "full" bodies. He also discussed the role of staff support for the RAC, noting that the RAC needs administrative support, but also need to have a role in gathering information and following through with the RAC's recommendations to staff and the Board. He said that the RAC needs staff support that is senior enough and respected within the organization. Mr. Dorsey said that the staff liaison needs to be able to prioritize the work that needs to be done for the RAC.

Ms. Kortum asked about next steps. Mr. Dorsey said that there needed to be a way to collate the feedback received at this meeting and put those concepts down on paper. Ms. Porter suggested designating two or three people to serve as liaisons to the review on the RAC side to gather information and allow for Board-RAC communication between now and the RAC's next meeting.

Rail Operator Announcements:

Robert Relyea from Metro's Office of Rail Transportation, said that he reviewed the RAC's recommendations on communications and noted that he agreed with most of the recommendations. He added that there were a couple issues that the Council needed to be aware of that may impact their recommendations, specifically:

- Train operators have significant responsibilities during incidents in addition to keeping passengers informed, including troubleshooting and flagging train movements;
- There are certain technical limitations regarding train announcements, especially when the operator "keys down" and leaves the cab;
- He explained the evolution of Metro's use of the word "momentarily," and noted that Metro is trying to develop better ways for operators to provide the most information to customers;
- Regarding end-of-line announcements, he said that Metro recognizes that there need to be better end-of-line announcements and that Metro is trying to reduce or eliminate the practice of "light-flashing" when trains terminate at non-end-of-line terminals such as Mt. Vernon Square or Grosvenor. He said that Metro needs to reach a final decision on the preferred practice.

He also noted that the 7000 Series railcars have automated announcements and that the next generation of railcars will have a more robust system.

Mr. Reusch noted the need for consistency among operators and the need for transparency during incidents to ensure riders' trust. Mr. Relyea noted that it is a challenge to achieve complete consistency across 1300+ employees, though he recognizes that it is an issue that need to be addressed. He added that Metro is trying to be more transparent with its customers.

Mr. White asked whether, now that railcars have automated announcements, whether there were plans to have any bilingual announcements or announcements in other languages. Mr. Relyea said that Metro is looking at options, but has stuck to providing announcements in other languages, Spanish specifically, at stations, because there are less time constraints on those announcements. He noted that announcements for the March 24th March for Our Lives will be in both English and Spanish.

Ms. Silva said that on several occasions she has encountered 7000 series trains providing incorrect announcements. Mr. Relyea said that these could be caused by any number of issues and that Metro's Engineering Department is aware of this and is working with the manufacturer, Kawasaki, on a fix.

Mr. Goffard noted that there is a wide variety in operator announcements and asked what kind of training operators receive in making announcements as well as what kind of quality assurance is performed to make sure that these announcements are being performed correctly. Mr. Relyea explained that operators do receive training on making announcements and noted that some of the issues that riders hear with announcements are the result of mechanical, rather than operator issues. He noted that on a typical day, there are approximately 15 supervisors out on the system in evaluating performance, and one of the things that they evaluate is operator announcements. He said that more supervisors have been added, but that this increase came with an increase in supervisor responsibilities. Mr. Relyea noted that Metro has recently been putting supervisors out on the system in plainclothes to evaluate performance and is looking at other ways to improve supervision. He added that quality assurance checks are performed regularly with information gathered forwarded to the respective division.

Mr. Fogel requested that a meeting be set up with staff and RAC members to review the RAC's recommendations in detail. Mr. Relyea said that he would talk with his staff to arrange something. Mr. Fogel said he would also appreciate some kind of written response to the RAC's suggestions.

Mr. Suh asked whether there were plans for American Sign Language announcements on the new 8000 Series railcars and about the practice of flashing lights on trains going out of service. Mr. Relyea responded that Metro needs to find a consistent practice with regard to flashing the interior lights on trains that are being taken out of service. He also discussed, in response to

comments from Mr. Suh, the “DLY” indication on train arrival signs, that indicate a delay in a train’s planned arrival.

Ms. Mason said that she was grateful that Mr. Relyea was at the RAC’s meeting to respond to the Council’s feedback, and requested that Metro consider reaching out to the RAC to get feedback on issues such as language or other or other issues.

Chair Report:

Ms. Kortum noted that the happy hour planned with Ms. Moorer, the Council’s previous staff coordinator, would need to be rescheduled.

Adjournment:

Without objection, the meeting was adjourned at 8:28 p.m.