

Riders' Advisory Council

February 5, 2020

Members Present:

Colin Reusch, Chair, At-Large
Andrew Kierig, Vice Chair, Virginia
Wil White, Vice Chair, At-Large
Katherine Kortum, District of Columbia
Rebekah Mason, Maryland
Patrick Sheehan, At-Large/Accessibility Advisory Committee
Yvette Washington, Maryland

Staff/Other Individuals Present:

Peter Cafiero, Director, Office of Intermodal Planning, Metro
Shyam Kannan, Vice President, Office of Planning, Metro
Yetunde Olumide, Vice President, Office of Management and Budget Services, Metro
John Pasek, Assistant Board Secretary, Metro
Lisa Schooley,

Call to Order:

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

Approval of Agenda:

The agenda was approved without objection.

Public Comment:

Kirti Suri, Legislative Counsel from DC Councilmember Robert White's office told the Council that Councilmember White and DC Council Chairman Phil Mendelson sent a letter to Metro regarding the service changes Metro proposed as part of its FY2021 Operating Budget. She also announced that the DC Council will be having its WMATA performance oversight hearing on February 19th at 10 a.m. at the John A. Wilson Building, and that anyone wishing to testify could sign up by emailing facilities@dccouncil.us. Ms. Suri also left copies of CM White's annual report.

Approval of Minutes:

Ms. White moved approval of the January Riders' Advisory Council meeting minutes. This motion was seconded by Ms. Kortum. The minutes were approved as presented without objection.

Metro's Proposed FY2021 Operating Budget:

Staff then presented information on Metro's Proposed FY2021 Operating Budget. Yetunde Olumide, Vice President of the Office of Management and Budget Services, provided an overview of Metro's cost and subsidy growth drivers. She noted that the budget goals of improving service and enhancing efficiencies are designed to fit within Metro's legislatively-mandated 3% subsidy growth cap.

Peter Cafiero, Director of Metro's Office of Intermodal Planning then reviewed the proposed changes to fares and service that are part of the Proposed FY2021 Operating Budget, including:

- Better weekend Metrobus service (matching Sunday service levels with current Saturday service levels);
- Improved MetroExtra service;
- Improved Metrorail Sunday service (running every 12 minutes versus every 15 minutes);
- Targeted restructuring of bus routes to increase efficiencies; and
- "Right-sizing" early morning weekday Metrorail service – running fewer trains between 5 and 6 a.m. when demand is less.

Shyam Kannan, Vice President of Metro's Office of Planning then reviewed the fare changes that were proposed as part of the budget, and noted that the fare changes were designed to work together as a package of changes. He also noted that customers using pass products will not see a fare increase. Mr. Kannan explained the proposal to simplify mileage tiers and incentivize weekend travel on Metrorail and to encourage the use of SmarTrip® on Metrobus. He noted that currently over 90% of Metrobus riders already use SmarTrip® cards to pay for their trip.

Mr. Kannan also reviewed the proposal to increase the transfer discount between bus and rail service to \$2.00, which was one of the recommendations of the Bus Transformation Project.

Lastly, Mr. Kannan reviewed the fare calculator tool on Metro's website that allows riders to calculate the change to their individual fare based on the budget proposals put forward.

Ms. Olumide then reviewed the timeline for budget adoption, noting that the Board is scheduled to approve a final FY2021 budget at the beginning of April and Metro's fiscal year would begin on July 1st, with any service and fare changes taking place around then.

Mr. Reusch then opened the floor to questions and comments from members of the Council.

Ms. Kortum asked how the proposed 25¢ surcharge for paying cash on Metrobus aligns with the findings from Metro's recent pilot of "cashless" service on Route 79, and, whether Metro will provide additional locations for riders to reload their SmarTrip® cards if it ultimately approves the surcharge.

Mr. Kannan said that Metro is advancing a large investment in mobile payments and an increase its retail footprint for reloading SmarTrip® cards in 2020, though he is unable to give a

date certain about those improvements. He explained that the purpose of the cashless pilot on Route 79 was three-fold: 1. To gauge the customer experience, and noted that 78% of riders, including 57% of Title VI riders supported the pilot; 2. To see if end-to-end run times would be measurably faster, which was inconclusive; and 3. To see if Metro could save on operating costs by needing fewer buses to cover the same number of trips. Mr. Kannan noted that the time savings weren't significant enough to allow Metro to assign fewer buses for the route. He noted that Metro was able to collect more detailed information about the various time that it takes for a customer to either tap their SmarTrip®, pay with cash, or reload their SmarTrip® card at the farebox.

Mr. Reusch asked whether the proposed expansion of reloading options would move forward whether or not the 25¢ surcharge was approved as part of the FY2021 budget. Ms. Olumide said that the retail expansion was moving forward regardless of the implementation status of the 25¢ surcharge.

Mr. Kierig asked whether Metro had considered a pilot of the 25¢ cash surcharge and noted that Metrobus ridership declined 22% from 2013 to 2019. He asked about any plans to improve bus ridership.

Ms. Olumide explained that, combined, the initiatives in the proposed budget are designed to increase ridership, including increased weekend Metrobus service and improved MetroExtra service, and are in response to customer requests. Mr. Kannan noted that Metro only controls pricing and service levels and that it depends on its jurisdictional partners for other improvements that could increase ridership, such as running way improvements.

Mr. Sheehan said that he has concerns about the proposed bus service changes and provided the example of changes proposed in the Glover Park neighborhood and the concerns riders have raised about those proposals. He noted that the number of bus change proposals has increased significantly since the budget was first announced earlier in the fall. He added that it isn't clear how to reconcile the bus changes proposed in the budget with proposals put forward as part of the Bus Transformation Project.

Mr. Cafiero responded that Metro's Office of Intermodal Planning, which manages service planning, and its Office of Planning, which oversees the Bus Transformation Project, have been coordinating on proposed service changes. He noted that Metro needs jurisdictions to do their part to help buses move faster, which is what can drive increases in ridership. In reference to the proposed changes in Glover Park, he explained that Metro is not proposing to reduce service, but rather to combine two services that operate one block apart, so that the combined service will operate more frequently. He said that this type of frequency improvement is exactly the type of strategy recommended by the Bus Transformation Project.

Mr. Cafiero also noted that the General Manager's initial proposal would have left large areas without transit service, but that the revised proposal is more surgical in its approach by combining existing routes and taking advantage of transfers to Metrorail, which would be more

heavily discounted under the proposed budget. He also went into more detail on the proposals for service changes on the 30-Series buses, which operate on Pennsylvania and Wisconsin Avenues. Mr. Cafiero said that he expects that with the proposed fare changes, bus ridership will grow more than projected.

Mr. Sheehan said that he will be interested to see if riders understand all of Metro's proposals. He said that he didn't think they would understand the complexities of all of these proposals, based on the reaction of riders in Glover Park. He also noted that if there are reductions in fixed-route Metrobus service, those reductions will affect MetroAccess service.

Mr. Cafiero said that there won't be any changes to MetroAccess service proposed as part of this docket, even if Metrobus service changes.

Mr. Pasek noted that the docket, which contains detailed information about the proposals, would be available beginning February 8th.

In response to a question from Mr. White, Mr. Kannan said that the proposed \$2.00 discount for bus-to-rail transfers would be applied both ways – bus-to-rail and rail-to-bus.

Mr. White asked whether Metro would be adjusting its schedules or its policy of accepting cash on buses after bus priority lanes were installed on certain corridors. Mr. Kannan noted that enhancing bus service requires a whole host of improvements, many of which require participation from the jurisdictions that control the streets.

Ms. Mason asked for data from the cashless pilot on Route 79. She said that she hoped to get some of the data from the Route 79 cashless pilot, specifically some of the metrics used to evaluate the pilot. She said that she was somewhat confused as to the goals of the pilot. She said that she was also interested in how Metro collected feedback on the pilot and the responses from the various segments of the respondents.

Ms. Mason said that she would like to see a list of community organizations that represent riders that Metro works with. She said she would also like to get information on Metro's plans to improve customer service, which the RAC has been requesting for a long time.

Mr. Kannan said that results of the cashless pilot on Route 79 were available on Metro's website and asked that this information be shared with the RAC. He also noted that there is a significant difference between a cashless bus route and a 25¢ surcharge or using a vending machine to add value to a SmarTrip® card. He said that Metro will continue to accept cash to add value to SmarTrip® cards, but the question is where it will be accepted.

Mr. Kannan noted that Metro maintains relationships with hundreds of community-based organizations and Metro can share that list with the RAC. Ms. Olumide added that Metro is holding hearings in three jurisdictions to allow for greater participation.

In response to discussion about the proposed budget item for additional customer service training, Mr. Cafiero said that his understanding was that the money would be allocated to help frontline employees improve their interactions with customers. Mr. Reusch said that, since this is a topic that has been of interest to the RAC for a long time, members were hoping for more detail on what those trainings might entail. Ms. Mason said that knowing more about what is expected of employees would help customers in knowing what they should expect in their interactions with employees.

Mr. Kieirig asked if there was a proposal was to pilot the cash surcharge and whether Metro was working to make it easier for people to buy unlimited use transit passes using transit benefits. Mr. Kannan said that staff recognizes that there are barriers to purchasing passes and that staff is working to make the website easier to navigate as well as easier for benefits administrators to allow for pass purchases. He said that he would need to check on a pilot for the cash surcharge.

Ms. Kortum said that she understood the proposal to “thin out” early morning service between 5 and 6 a.m., especially if demand doesn’t support rush hour levels of service, but she doesn’t understand the rationale of continuing to charge peak fares for reduced levels of service. Mr. Cafiero said that there are still expenses associated with this level of service and ramping up to rush hour service levels. Ms. Kortum asked about the financial impact of charging off-peak fares for the first hour of service in the morning to reflect the lower frequencies.

Mr. Reusch then turned the floor over to Lisa Schooley from Metro’s Office of External Relations to discuss Metro’s outreach on the budget.

Ms. Schooley then provided an overview of Metro’s communication plans to let riders know about the proposed changes. She explained that there would be signage at Metrorail stations, and on all Metrobuses and MetroAccess vehicles. She said that information will direct riders to Metro’s website (wmata.com/budget), and the website will include information in English and Spanish, along with a survey, fare calculator and maps of the proposed bus changes. She added that public hearings will be held from February 24-26 and the public record will close on March 2, barring inclement weather.

Ms. Schooley also provided information about the distribution of information to customers. She explained that brochures will be available throughout the Metro system and will also be distributed by street teams. She said that there are approximately 50 outreach shifts scheduled during the public comment period, 60% focused on Metrobus, and that Metrobus outreach was focused on routes with significant changes proposed, routes with high levels of cash payment, and MetroExtra routes that would see a proposed \$1.00 increase in fare. She added that street teams will have tablets available to allow riders to complete the survey on site and can also send links to the survey via email or text.

Ms. Schooley also noted that Metro works with over 200 Community Based Organizations (CBOs) to disseminate information, and that Metro’s Office of Government Relations also works

with jurisdictions and community groups to distribute information. She added that there will be open houses at each of the public hearings to allow for question-and-answer periods with Metro staff.

Mr. Sheehan asked if Ms. Schooley could separate out the CBOs that work with the disability community and share that list with Metro's Department of Access Services. Ms. Schooley responded that she is already in the process of responding to that request.

In response to a question from Ms. Kortum, Ms. Schooley said that the budget website was optimized for viewing on mobile devices, though there are still some tweaks being made to the fare calculator to ensure that it's mobile-friendly.

Mr. White asked if Ms. Schooley could share the specific dates and locations for Metro's outreach. She said that she has shared this list with Mr. Pasek and he can provide the list to Council members. She added that the list isn't public, since dates and locations may need to change based on weather or other factors, but if any RAC members wanted to attend an outreach event, she would make the street teams aware of that possibility.

Mr. White asked if Metro was considering having more than one public hearing per jurisdiction. Ms. Schooley explained that, under Metro's Public Participation Plan, the authority tries to go to where riders are by doing outreach, rather than requiring riders come to Metro meetings. She said that Metro treats all of the feedback it receives equally – whether they are submitted online, out in the field, or at a public hearing. She said that the strategy is to try and reach the maximum amount of people in the time allotted.

Ms. Mason asked if Ms. Schooley could share the list of CBOs and whether there was a document that provided an overview of the proposed changes that could be distributed. Ms. Schooley said that she could share the list and that there was an overview document available for distribution.

Mr. Kierig asked what Metro's plan was to show alternatives for riders whose routes are proposed to be eliminated, giving the example of Route 29W which is proposed for elimination. Ms. Schooley said that there will be information about each route's proposed changes and any alternative service posted on the website, as well as approximately 130 signs posted at bus stops and that if service is ultimately changed or cancelled, staff will do additional outreach before those changes go into effect. Mr. Kierig said that, during recent schedule changes during December 2019, there was a lack of information provided about revised schedules.

Mr. Cafiero added that Metro tried to provide alternatives for service that is proposed to be changed or eliminated, but that some routes don't have any good alternatives. He also noted that the ridership numbers Metro used to make its determination on eliminating or changing routes was collected prior to the strike at Cinder Bed Road.

Ms. Washington said that Metro never does outreach in her community and asked how she can let staff know if materials aren't posted in her neighborhood. Ms. Schooley said that it would take a few days for all of the signs to be posted on buses, but that if she didn't see them by the end of the week of February 10th, to contact Mr. Pasek and let him know so that staff could investigate further. She asked that Ms. Washington include the bus number to help identify gaps in coverage.

Ms. Mason asked for more information about the outreach shifts. She suggested that outreach workers should have the ability to help riders not only fill out surveys, but also to find alternative service. Ms. Schooley said that the goal of the outreach is to dispense information that is relevant to the time and location of each particular shift, and that teams will have tablets available to give more detail on specific proposals. She said that she expected teams assigned to provide information on proposed bus route changes will be having more one-on-one conversations and will also have teams of two people circulating among bus stops to distribute information.

Mr. Sheehan asked whether it would be possible for someone to discuss Metro's budget outreach plans with one of the Accessibility Advisory Committee's subcommittees.

Mr. Reusch noted that there had been discussion of a follow-up meeting for the RAC to refine its recommendations on the budget and asked whether or not there was any interest. He said that he would poll members to get their availability.

Mr. Sheehan said that he would ask Phil Posner, the AAC's chair, to share its budget recommendations and proposals with the RAC.

Mr. Reusch asked if members would be willing to do research on certain issues of interest to help the RAC develop a position.

Ms. Mason said that she would tackle the issue of the cash surcharge and the fee for loading SmarTrip® cards on board buses.

Mr. Reusch added that if there are any proposals in Metro's budget that members especially like, they should champion them as the RAC develops its recommendations on the budget.

There was further discussion about pending legislation in Maryland and Virginia that would allow Metro to exceed its annual 3% subsidy growth cap.

There was further discussion about whether or not the RAC wanted to advocate for a flat fare for Metrorail.

Mr. Reusch said that he would send around information to members about a call and asked them to put together any proposals they had for the RAC's budget recommendations.

Ms. Kortum asked about the status of RAC appointments. Mr. Pasek said that he needed to advertise for candidates because the existing applicant pool wasn't sufficient. Mr. Kierig noted that he had spoken to some people and encouraged them to apply.

Adjournment:

Mr. Reusch adjourned the meeting at 8:03 p.m.

DRAFT