

## **Riders' Advisory Council**

**October 2, 2019**

### **Members Present:**

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

### **Staff/Other Individuals Present:**

Paul Smedberg, Chair, Metro Board of Directors  
John Pasek, Assistant Board Secretary, Metro  
Phil Posner, Chair, Accessibility Advisory Committee

### **Call to Order:**

Mr. Reusch called the October 2019 meeting to order at 6:37 p.m.

### **Approval of Agenda:**

The agenda was approved without objection. The approval of September meeting minutes was deferred until the following meeting.

### **Public Comment:**

James Pizzurro spoke about the need for Metro to provide more complete Metrobus data and asked that the RAC press Metro to provide that data. He explained that, based on data collected last spring, as much as 14% of scheduled Metrobus stop visits didn't occur, or there wasn't data to show that they occurred. He said that this means that riders cannot rely on Metrobus schedules, Metrobus real-time data or the data provided by third-party apps. Mr. Pizzurro encouraged the RAC to press for information from WMATA on why these data gaps are occurring.

Mr. Reusch said that the Council could discuss this item further at the end of the meeting and decide whether it wanted to take further action on this issue.

**Discussion with Metro Board Chair Paul Smedberg:**

Mr. Reusch introduced Metro Board Chairman Paul Smedberg. Mr. Smedberg gave the Council a brief history of his roles at Metro. He noted that he represents the Northern Virginia Transportation Commission (NVTC) on the Metro Board and served on the Alexandria City Council for fifteen years, and served on NVTC for several years, including as chair of NVTC a few times. He explained that he served on the Metro Board for two years as an alternate member and then became a principal member when another Board member left the Board.

Mr. Smedberg noted that the Board has turned a page in the past couple months, including proposing and approving ethics reforms that clarify the ethics investigation process and how that process will be reported to the public. He noted that the Board had its first strategic retreat a few weeks ago and had a good discussion around the issues and hoped to act in a more strategic manner moving forward. He said that, moving forward, there will be changes to the way meetings are conducted and how information is communicated.

Mr. Smedberg said that he hoped to develop and improve the relationship between the Board and the RAC and make that relationship more strategic. He suggested that one of the areas where the Council can focus its work is on making recommendations to Metro's fare structure, and that Christian Dorsey, the RAC's liaison on the Board, also feels that this is an issue for the Council to address. He also suggested that the RAC look at improvements for customers in a structured timeline – things that can be changed within three years, or within three-to-seven years, and then those that would take more than seven years, specifically customer-facing improvements that Metro should be considering. He asked what Metro can do for its riders, given the expected growth that will be coming to the region through projects such as the second Amazon headquarters. Mr. Smedberg also noted that there has been a lot of work done as part of the Bus Transformation Project, and asked how the RAC, as a group, can contribute to the study's ongoing work as it enters its next phase.

Mr. Reusch said that the RAC has long had a desire to be involved in the earlier stages of priority-setting and planning for the agency. He noted that the Council's greatest frustrations have been not being asked for input until an idea is well on its way to approval; and the lack of feedback it receives on the suggestions it puts forward. He said that he would love for the RAC to align its business with the Board's committee proposals and priorities that the Board identified in its strategic retreat. He noted that the RAC has made several suggestions over the past few years to improve the riders experience – including recommendations on customer service and communications. He said that in the longer-term, riders want frequent and reliable service and noted that the RAC would like to see steps take to restore the Metro system to prior levels of frequency and reliability, along with a restoration of its hours of service.

Mr. Reusch also noted the Council's opposition to Metro providing funding for ride-sharing services to companies such as Uber and Lyft; he said that he understood the financial aspects of the program, but the RAC firmly believed that public transit should not be funding private corporations. He also mentioned the 2018 report titled "Stabilizing and Growing Ridership" and

said that the RAC would welcome the opportunity to discuss how to implement the recommendations contained in the report.

Ms. Cook said that she feels that the RAC is a strength to Metro, but that she has concerns about its long-term viability. She noted that the Council's numbers had been substantially cut and she is concerned that its numbers will fall further. She said that it is helpful for Metro to have a group of people who think about its challenges on a consistent basis, since they have a better understanding of the issues facing the authority. Ms. Cook also expressed concern for riders who need to bring strollers on the bus.

In response to a question from Ms. Kortum, Mr. Smedberg said that he drove to that evening's meeting to pick someone up from the airport afterwards.

Ms. Kortum also asked if there were any themes from riders' testimony at the public hearing that took place earlier in the evening. Mr. Smedberg said that there wasn't a particular theme to the testimony, but that he heard comments from residents of the Buzzard Point neighborhood who had concerns about growth and from riders on upper 16<sup>th</sup> Street NW who were concerned about proposed service changes there, including the potential removal of some bus stops. He added that there were also comments from riders about bus routes around Dupont Circle.

Mr. Posner noted that there were also requests for on-demand transit service, similar to what is being piloted in Montgomery County.

Mr. Kierig thanked Mr. Smedberg for coming. He said that he understood that ensuring that there is late-night Metrorail service is an important issue for the District of Columbia and noted that if the District really wanted to provide late-night transit service, it could run the Circulator or pay for rail replacement bus service, rather than spending money to subsidize ride-share service. He said that he also wanted to know what Metro is doing to improve communications with riders, especially during disruptions and to improve the overall rider experience. He noted his recent experience during a service disruption on the Blue/Orange/Silver lines and the need for Metro to provide more data to allow riders to make better decisions about their trips.

Mr. Reusch noted that Metro's communications issues fall into two categories – how Metro communicates during non-standard situations and Metro's overall provision of real-time information to allow riders to know what is happening with Metro service. He asked Mr. Smedberg whether the Board would be willing to press the Board to engage more on these types of issues. Mr. Smedberg noted that the Board sets policy and that it has been hesitant to delve into more specific operational issues, but it would be possible to raise these issues with management to bring greater attention to them.

Mr. Cavese said that in the prior month's discussion with the director of Metro's Office of Management and Budget, there was a lot of discussion about costs, but not a lot of discussion around fares, besides "directional" discussion – i.e. whether fares should go up/down. He

explained that there needs to be a broader discussion around fares, perhaps to make Metro's fares simpler and more rational, and that Metro needs to look at its fares in the context of value for riders, especially given the new competition it has. Mr. Smedberg noted that the Board has a policy of examining fares every two years, but hasn't done so for three years now, and that it must look at the sustainability of the fare system. He explained that the previous pattern of 5-7% annual subsidy increases wasn't sustainable for the jurisdictions.

Ms. Mason noted her opposition to Metro subsidizing ride-sharing services and said that she would like to get more information on how the lack of late-night service impacts low- and middle-income riders in the suburbs. She said she also wanted more information on how Metro develops and implements its pilot programs. She also discussed the concept of fare equity – providing lower fares for low-income riders and suggested that such a program could reduce the rate of fare evasion. Mr. Smedberg said that all aspects of Metro's fare structure are open to discussion and suggestions.

Mr. Sheehan said that he thought Metro's program to improve the lighting at its stations was a great one, and that he had heard good feedback and comments about the lighting improvements at the recently-reopened Metro stations on the Blue and Yellow lines. He said that he hoped that the Board gets a consistent set of recommendations from both the RAC and the AAC. He explained that the AAC is exploring options that would make the Metro system more accessible, and that the AAC agrees with the RAC's position that Metro fares are too complicated. Mr. Sheehan noted that, due to the way they are calculated, MetroAccess fares are even more complicated than fixed-route bus/rail fares, and that an overall simplification of fares would help. He also discussed issues around electric scooters that affect Metro riders, especially those with disabilities.

Ms. Silva said that, given recent declines in ridership, Metro cannot depend on raising fares every year to balance its budgets.

Ms. Kortum said that, as part of any discussion of Metro service hours, early morning service should also be included. She also suggested that Metro look at fare capping, which is a program where, once a rider pays a certain amount for rides over a set amount of time, additional rides during that period are free. She explained that such a program could increase Metro's fare equity, as it doesn't require riders to pay for an unlimited-use pass upfront.

Ms. Kortum also asked Mr. Smedberg what changes he would encourage Metro staff to make for next summer's station shutdowns, based on the feedback he received on the summer 2019 station closures. Mr. Smedberg said that, after the first week of the station closures, the Alexandria City Council heard very few complaints from riders. He said that any lessons learned occurred within the first week of the shutdown – that there is a need to ensure that enough buses and personnel are provided, and that staff receives adequate training prior to starting service.

Mr. Kierig noted that there were several issues with shuttle service during the first few weeks of the shutdown. He said that now that the 2019 shutdown has concluded, people are concerned about the lack of information for the summer 2020 shutdown and asked when riders will get information about service plans for the coming summer. Mr. Smedberg said that planning is underway and noted that a lot of communications will come from Metro's jurisdictional partners, in this case, from Fairfax County. He noted that for the summer 2019 shutdown, the City of Alexandria and Fairfax County did the bulk of communications and outreach to residents and encouraged Mr. Kierig to reach out to the Fairfax County Department of Transportation for more information.

Ms. Mason said that she felt that communications about Metro shutdowns should come from Metro itself, and not from another entity. Mr. Smedberg noted that the communications provided about the shutdown were coordinated among the City of Alexandria, Fairfax County, Arlington County, DASH, Fairfax Connector and other transit providers and said that he expects the summer 2020 shutdown communication will involve similar coordination.

Mr. Reusch said that he looked forward to the RAC working more closely with Mr. Smedberg and other Board members and more proactively addressing issues. He asked that, as the Board develops more details on its priorities, Mr. Smedberg keep the RAC informed as to where it can provide input.

**New Business:**

Mr. Reusch opened the floor for items of new business from members.

*Station Reopenings:*

Mr. White provided outreach materials from the Bus Transformation Project and from the re-opening of the Blue/Yellow line stations. He said that the majority of the riders that he encountered at the Blue/Yellow line station reopenings were happy

Ms. Silva noted that she was at Huntington for the reopening and that many riders said that they stuck with Metro throughout the shutdown, even when rail service wasn't available. Mr. Pasek noted that about 60% of riders used shuttles or other transit services during the shutdown, which was higher than had been predicted.

Ms. Cook told members that, in addition to Metro staffers, staff from the City of Alexandria were also on hand to welcome riders back to the re-opened stations.

Kirti Suri from DC Councilmember Robert White's office introduced herself and noted that she will be attending RAC meetings as her schedule permits.

*Blue/Orange/Silver Line Reliability and Capacity Study:*

Mr. Pasek told the Council that he received a request for one or two RAC members to serve on the citizens' advisory panel for this study. He explained that Metro is studying opportunities to

alleviate congestion and crowding on the section of the Blue/Orange/Silver lines between Rosslyn and Stadium-Armory.

In response to a question from Ms. Kortum, Mr. Pasek said that appointees to the panel should expect to attend around three meetings over the coming year.

After discussion, the Council decided that Mr. Kierig would serve as the RAC's representative on the panel, with Ms. Kortum and Ms. Mason serving as alternates.

*RAC Terms/Recruitment:*

Mr. Pasek noted that several members' terms would be expiring in December and that he would be reaching out to them to see if they were interested in continuing to serve on the Council.

*Real Time Data:*

Mr. Pizzurro discussed transit data and data quality and explained that while Metro tries to update its data on a quarterly basis, operational changes can take place more frequently than that, and this can cause confusion for riders. He also noted issues with real-time data, giving the example that around 14% of buses could not be tracked in the preceding month. He said that providing improved real-time information would not only improve the customer experience but would also improve Metro's performance metrics.

In response to a question from Mr. Kierig, Mr. Pizzurro explained how real-time data was used in developing the Coalition for Smarter Growth's "Metrobus Report Card" that tracked Metrobus performance. He said that having more reliable data would make this kind of analysis easier and would benefit stakeholders by giving them more specific information to use when advocating for improvements.

Mr. Pizzurro further explained that there are about two or three people at Metro who manage this data, which means that it can be difficult to get information and said that other transit agencies in the U.S. have more robust programs. He said that the issue of data quality will become larger as more and more entities get involved with transit data. There was also discussion about industry standards for transit feeds.

Ms. Mason asked whether the data that Metro is providing is in accordance with the terms of its agreements with developers. Mr. Pizzurro provided examples of certain terms of his data-sharing agreement with Metro. He noted that he had filed a records request with Metro and would update the RAC with the status of that request. He noted that some of the terms of his agreement with Metro hinder his ability to communicate on certain issues.

Mr. Reusch said that the issues that Mr. Pizzurro raised have implications from both customer service and for agency accountability standpoints. He asked if any RAC members were interested in championing this issue to please let him know. Ms. Mason said that she would be willing to work on this issue.

**Adjournment:**

Without objection, Mr. Reusch adjourned the meeting at 8:31 p.m.

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