



26 March 2020

Chairman Smedberg and Members of the WMATA Board:

Over the past two months' meetings, the RAC heard presentations from WMATA staff and deliberated on the FY 2021 budget proposal. In general, we applaud WMATA staff and Board for developing a budget proposal with so many rider-facing initiatives. As a body, the RAC has historically encouraged budgetary policy that prioritizes stabilizing and growing ridership, improving customer safety and experience, and minimizing financial burden on vulnerable rider populations. To that end, please find below our feedback on various aspects of the budget proposal.

I. Operating Service Proposals

Rail and Bus Service Improvements

The RAC overwhelmingly supports the operating service proposals to reduce weekend Metrorail headways, partially restore late night Metrorail service, and improve service frequencies for weekend Metrobus and MetroExtra service. For too long, riders have endured long wait times or simply avoided utilizing WMATA during the weekends as a result of wait times and perceived lack of reliability. As such, we favor any initiatives to improve or restore service and meet or induce demand during weekend and off-peak hours.

Weekday Early Morning "Right-sizing"

We are, however, concerned with the proposal to reduce or "right-size" Metrorail service during early morning hours (before 6:00am). Historically, WMATA has sought to shift ridership from peak hours to off-peak hours to ease system crowding; this change would seem to disincentivize riders from utilizing the system during less crowded morning hours while still charging peak fares. While the RAC understands the desire to seek cost savings by reducing service during times of lower utilization, we would encourage the Board to consider whether such changes are in conflict with efforts to shift demand to pre-peak hours. Moreover, if this specific proposal is adopted, the RAC is strongly opposed to charging peak fares when the system is

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not providing headways that reflect peak service.

Metrobus Service Reductions

The RAC remains concerned about any proposal to reduce or eliminate bus service without careful consideration. While we appreciate efforts to reduce redundancies and combine routes where possible, we caution WMATA to carefully evaluate how any such changes would require low-income riders to seek additional modes of transportation or extend the duration of their daily commute (e.g., via additional transfers).

Furthermore, the RAC is not convinced that low ridership alone is cause enough for elimination of bus routes. Given that bus ridership across the system continues to suffer, we question the wisdom of making it more difficult to access the system and instead encourage WMATA to seek strategies to improve ridership and induce demand, especially in areas where current service is already sparse or infrequent.

II. Fare Proposals

Metrorail

The RAC is generally cautious of fare increases while generally in favor of simplifying fare structures. While we do not necessarily oppose increasing base peak or maximum rail fares to ensure adequate operational funding, any such proposed changes should be evaluated for equitable impact. Moreover, the RAC urges highly publicized communications in advance of fare increases to avoid any unnecessary confusion or negative impact on riders.

With regard to the proposed weekend flat fare, the RAC appreciates the intent to have weekend fares better reflect levels of service. However, we remain unconvinced that a weekend flat fare would represent enough of an incentive to drive any significant growth in weekend ridership; improving frequency and reliability of weekend service is more likely to achieve this objective. If the current weekend fare levels could be utilized to offset other proposed fare increases or implement strategies toward improving service frequency and reliability, we would encourage the Board and staff to consider pursuing such avenues instead of a weekend flat fare. In addition, the RAC does not support any changes to weekend fare structure that would result in any riders paying more than the current fare structure requires (e.g., alternative Board proposal for weekend flat fare of \$2.50 or \$2.75) nor does the RAC support imposing peak fares after midnight.

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Metrobus

The RAC strongly supports the proposal to lower the price of 7-day regional passes from \$15 to \$12. However, we do not support the proposals to impose a \$0.25 surcharge for cash fare or onboard cash loading. While we understand that the intent is to reduce the use of cash on Metrobus in hopes of keeping buses moving, our concern is that these proposals would disproportionately impact low-income riders, riders with disabilities and riders of color. WMATA's 2019 cashless bus pilot did not produce results that support the implementation of such policies. Moreover, the current availability of off-board SmartTrip loading options remains too limited to reasonably assume that affected riders would be able to easily avoid paying these penalties. And again, the RAC is wary of any policy changes that discourage Metrobus ridership during a time when ridership continues to decline.

Metrorail and Metrobus

The RAC strongly supports the proposal to increase the bus/rail transfer discount to \$2.00 and reiterates its support for the expansion of pass products, including short-trip passes. The RAC continues to receive feedback from riders, namely those employed by federal agencies, that they are unable to utilize their Smart Benefits to purchase unlimited passes. The RAC recommends additional outreach to employers, including federal agencies, to identify and eliminate barriers to the purchase of passes.

III. Other Items

The RAC supports efforts to increase the availability of 8 car trains, assuming rail car availability and power infrastructure is in place. We also generally support the line item to improve customer service; however we would welcome additional information and opportunities for input on how this initiative will be structured and implemented.

Please feel free to contact me at colinreusch+metro@gmail.com with any questions or concerns.

Thank You,

Colin Reusch
Chair, WMATA Riders' Advisory Council