

Statement of
Francis DeBernardo, Chair
Riders' Advisory Council
Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority
Before the
Appropriations Committee Subcommittee on Transportation, Housing and Urban Development
and Related Agencies
United States Senate

May 19, 2010

Chairman Murray, Ranking Member Bond and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for inviting me to testify today. My name is Frank DeBernardo and I am chair of the Metro Riders' Advisory Council.

The Riders' Advisory Council was established by Metro in September 2005 and serves as the riders' voice within Metro. The Council provides feedback to the Board as well as customer input to Metro staff. Council members are appointed by the Board of Directors. The Council consists of 21 members, two from each of the District of Columbia, Maryland and Virginia, two appointed at-large and the Chair of the Accessibility Advisory Committee. Members use all of Metro's transit services – Metrobus, Metrorail and MetroAccess – and represent a diverse mix of ages, backgrounds and ways in which they use Metro.

Metro experienced several tragedies in 2009, and suffered a substantial loss of public confidence. The June 2009 crash on the Red Line and subsequent declines in service reliability not only shocked and saddened the region, they also accelerated awareness of the larger problem, the growing disrepair of the Metrorail infrastructure.

Despite the challenges faced by WMATA, it remains a vital asset to the Washington region. A recent Washington Post poll found that 80% of riders rate the system positively. During April 2010, Metrorail recorded three of its top five highest ridership days (April 1st, 2nd and 7th). This underscores the region's dependence on Metro and also highlights the need to redouble efforts to maintain and expand the system.

On behalf of the Council, I would like to first commend President Obama for including \$150 million in his proposed FY2011 budget for capital and preventive maintenance projects at Metro. These grants, matched by dedicated funding from Metro's jurisdictional partners, will help fund projects to address Metro's most critical safety needs. As riders, we appreciate the federal government's recognition of the unique relationship between the federal government and Metro and urge you to ensure that these funds remain in the FY2011 budget as it is considered by Congress. We ask, too, that you help to ensure that local jurisdictions will continue to adequately fund Metro's capital needs by making any federal aid dependent on maintenance of efforts by local jurisdictions.

Along with the \$300 million provided annually through the Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act of 2008, Metro and its partners must finalize a new capital funding agreement prior to the beginning of the new fiscal year on July 1, 2010. We are encouraged that jurisdictions have committed to fund a \$5 billion six-year capital plan. Recent decisions to restore funding for Metro's capital plan represent good news for riders. However, Metro estimated that it has \$11 billion in capital needs over the next ten years; the six-year plan, as proposed, will mean that Metro will still fall short of this estimate of needs by over \$3 billion over the next ten years.

Failing to keep the system in a state of good repair seriously threatens safety. While certainly not as dramatic as the incidents that have occurred over the past year, crowded platforms following service disruptions, crumbling platform tiles and out-of-service elevators and escalators are significant, recurring safety concerns.

Ensuring stable and sufficient capital funding for Metro is necessary to improve safety.

As WMATA prepares to enter into its next capital plan on July 1st of this year, governments must also provide the resources necessary to adequately maintain Metro's safety and service, from specific safety recommendations from the National Transportation Safety Board to the everyday yet critical maintenance challenges.

In addition, WMATA must secure support for its Operating Budget. Closing the currently-projected \$190 million operating budget gap for FY2011 will likely require both substantial fare increases and significant service cuts. Proposed service cuts, while greatly reduced from the original proposals, will still result in riders paying more for less service. During recent public hearings on WMATA's proposed operating budget, fare increases and service reductions, riders expressed a clear preference for increased fares over reductions in service. However, fares cannot be raised too greatly lest riders, especially the most vulnerable, be priced off of Metro. In addition, members of the public stated clearly that Metro must work to improve its service reliability.

The Council is encouraged that Metro will, next month, launch its' "Vital Signs" report to provide the Board, the public and other stakeholders a detailed overview of Metro's monthly performance. As rider representatives, the Council looks forward to working with Metro to ensure that these reports provide meaningful information and that issues they identify are subsequently addressed. It is an old adage that "What gets measured gets done." These reports represent an opportunity for an honest dialogue between Metro and its stakeholders about what needs improvement and how we can work together to make those improvements happen.

Commuters are not the only ones who benefit from good transit. The entire region benefits economically. Tourists from around the country who visit the nation's capital benefit from having a safe and convenient way to see the city. The federal government benefits from greater productivity. And drivers benefit from reduced congestion on roadways. For that reason, the Riders' Advisory Council and transit advocacy groups asked local jurisdictions to increase their contributions enough to forestall severe service cuts, and it appears that many of the most onerous cuts will be avoided.

Over the long term, federal, state and local governments must recognize the tremendous asset that Metro represents to the region and support it accordingly. A majority of residents in the aforementioned poll said that the region should find new ways to fund Metro, even if that meant raising some taxes.

Metro's budget difficulties are certainly not unique among the nation's transit systems. A recent study released by the American Public Transit Association noted that 84% of transit systems in the United States are planning to raise fares and/or decrease service, or have already done so. Metro does provide uniquely direct value to the federal government, and therefore we hope Congress and the states can work together to explore long-term funding sources.

In the midst of all of these challenges, Metro must also find a new, permanent General Manager. The Council hopes that as the Board begins its search it will solicit input from all of Metro's stakeholders, including its riders and its employees.

Riders have expressed their vision for improvements at Metro. They want more reliable service, greater focus on customers, and clearer, more direct and more frequent communication from Metro, especially when things go wrong. While the General Manager must ensure a safe system, the region also needs a GM able to improve service quality and communicate effectively with the public to restore confidence. The Board should seek a candidate able to address Metro's long-term as well as short-term challenges and listen to stakeholders' views about those challenges.

Safety should top the list of Metro's core values. Effective oversight is also critical to maintaining safety and customer confidence in transit. Still, safety cannot exist in a vacuum. Statistics show that commuting by rail is approximately 34 times safer than driving, and many riders make a daily decision between the two.

Mandates that improve safety while maintaining service quality can greatly enhance transit; mandates that impair service in the long run in the name of safety will only drive commuters to other, more dangerous modes of travel. Transit must be safe; it also must not be permanently hamstrung in ways that actually make travelers across all modes less safe.

We are pleased that Congress is taking a strong interest in the safety and success of the Washington area's transit system. At the same time, safety for commuters in our nation's capital does not start and end with Metrorail. A US Department of Agriculture employee was killed by a driver after the recent snowstorm when the employee tried to walk to the Branch Avenue Metrorail station in Prince George's County, Maryland, where the sidewalks had not been cleared.

Metro safety issues have received considerable press recently, but the degree of press attention has been so great specifically because Metrorail fatalities are so rare, while fatalities on roadways are common to the point that we have become inured to these tragedies. This Congress should not ignore these larger safety concerns, and could draw needed attention to them by also conducting oversight into the ways in which elements of the entire transportation network, including our roadway designs, snow removal policies, and traffic law enforcement succeed or fail at maximizing the safety of commuters on all modes.

A safe, reliable, well-maintained and adequately funded Metro system will enhance the entire region, including the federal government. I thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony and would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Attachments:

Attachment A – List of Current Riders’ Advisory Council Members

Attachment B – Letter to Board of Directors Concerning Metro’s FY2011 Operating Budget,
dated April 19, 2010

Attachment A

**Riders' Advisory Council
Roster
(as of May 17, 2010)**

2010 Officers:

Chair: Frank DeBernardo

District of Columbia Vice-Chair: David Alpert

Maryland Vice-Chair: Victoria Wilder

Virginia Vice-Chair: Dham Guruswamy

Jurisdiction:

At-Large:

Dham Guruswamy

Carl Seip

Patrick Sheehan (Accessibility Advisory Committee Chair)

District of Columbia:

David Alpert

Kelsi Bracmort

Patricia Daniels

Kenneth DeGraff

Carol Carter Walker

Diana Zinkl

Maryland:

Sharon Conn (Prince George's County)

Frank DeBernardo (Prince George's County)

Christopher Farrell (Montgomery County)

Ronald Whiting (Montgomery County)

Victoria Wilder (Montgomery County)

Virginia:

Penelope Everline (Arlington County)

Robert Petrine (Fairfax County)

Clayton Sinyai (Fairfax County)

Lorraine Silva (Arlington County)

Evelyn Tomaszewski (Fairfax County)

Lillian White (City of Alexandria)



600 Fifth Street NW
Washington, DC 20001
202-962-2891

April 19, 2010

Chairman Benjamin and Members of the Board:

This letter serves as the formal position of the WMATA Riders' Advisory Council on the FY2011 Operating Budget, currently estimated to contain a \$189.2 million shortfall.

First, we recognize and appreciate the efforts of the Board of Directors to solicit meaningful public comment on a wide variety of proposals to address the current budget situation. Providing the public with alternatives has spurred public debate and allowed riders to select from a menu of options to create a sound FY2011 budget. We strongly encourage the Board and the Authority to review the FY2011 budget and reduce administrative spending as much as possible to close the projected budget gap.

Over the past several months, our members have held lengthy meetings devoted purely to the budget, attended public hearings, solicited feedback on their commutes, and debated the merits of the many different proposals put forward by WMATA staff, the Board and other groups.

This Council is faced with two distasteful options— service reductions which could drastically impact the quality of life in our region and/or fare increases that might price some residents out of using our transit system.

To limit the need for these drastic options, the R.A.C. continues to strongly support increased jurisdictional subsidies and dedicated local and federal funding for the Metro system. While budgets are tight, we remain hopeful that local and Congressional leaders will fight to expand Metro funding at the jurisdictional and federal level in recognition of the Authority's role as a unique regional and national asset.

We also recognize that Metro will make changes to MetroAccess service, continue negotiations with its operating unions to decrease costs, cut administrative positions, and continue to explore alternative revenue sources in an effort to reduce the budget shortfall in FY2011.

We are deferring to the Accessibility Advisory Committee's recommendations on the proposed changes to MetroAccess, which have already been submitted as part of the public hearing record.

If the Board, after it exhausts all other options to close the FY2011 budget gap, finds that fare increases and service cuts on Metrorail and Metrobus are absolutely necessary, the WMATA Riders' Advisory Council prefers the following proportions and priorities for the Board's decision-making:

If any fare increases should be necessary, we prefer the Board implement them in the following order from least to most undesirable:

1. a) Decreasing the transfer time among all modes from 3 to 2 hours,
b) raising the fare differential for (rail) paper farecards, and
c) instituting a peak-of-peak rail surcharge, *which are preferable to*
2. a) Increasing late-night weekend fares (after midnight),
b) increasing the reserved parking fee, and
c) increasing airport bus fares (with the consideration that steps be taken to protect airport workers), *which are preferable to*
3. a) Increasing bicycle locker rental fees,
b) increasing general parking fees, and
c) increasing express bus fares for non-airport buses, *which are preferable to*
4. Increasing the SmarTrip fare differential on bus, *which is preferable to*
5. Increasing base bus fare along with an increased transfer discount, *which is preferable to*
6. Increasing regular (rush hour) rail fare, *which is preferable to*
7. Increasing reduced (off-peak/weekend) rail fare, *which is preferable to*
8. a) Any special event fares on rail,
b) peak fare surcharges on crowded bus routes, and
c) increasing base bus fare without increasing the transfer discount, *which are preferable to*
9. Reducing the age at which children ride free, from under five years of age to under three years of age.

If any service cuts to Metrorail should be necessary, we prefer the Board implement them in the following order from least to most undesirable:

1. a) Modifying headways and train lengths on four holidays: Columbus Day, Veterans' Day, Martin Luther King's Birthday and Presidents' Day;
b) Restructuring peak service on the Red Line to have 3 min headways from Grosvenor to Silver Spring and 6 min from Silver Spring to Glenmont and Grosvenor to Shady Grove, and
c) early morning weekday headway widening, *which are preferable to*
2. Closing station entrances or mezzanine levels (after a full and transparent review of safety and security issues these closures may cause), *which are preferable to*
3. Weekend headway widening, *which is preferable to*
4. Late night headway widening, *which is preferable to*
5. A later weekday opening time at 5:30am, *which is preferable to*
6. A later weekend opening time at 8:00am, *which is preferable to*
7. a) Earlier weekend closing times and
b) weekend station closures, *which are preferable to*
8. a) Elimination of peak 8-car trains,
b) elimination of Yellow Line service to Fort Totten off-peak/weekends, and
c) elimination of Yellow Line service after 9:30 p.m. and on weekends except for a rail shuttle between King Street - Huntington.

If any service cuts to Metrobus should be necessary, we prefer the Board implement them in the following order from least to most undesirable:

1. a) Reducing and eliminating bus stops after a full and transparent review of cost, safety and security measures that these changes may cause, and
b) reductions in holiday service, *which are preferable to*
2. Eliminating of line segments/local overlap, *which is preferable to*
3. Peak-period headway widening, *which is preferable to*
4. a) Weekend headway widening, and
b) off-peak weekday headway widening.

We strongly recommend that any proposals to eliminate entire bus lines, weekend routes or service, or late-night (after midnight) trips be examined on a case-by-case basis and give consideration to distance and accessibility of alternative route service during peak and off-peak times and route efficiency metrics.

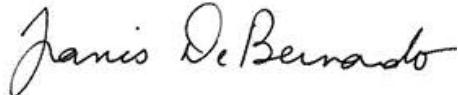
Additionally, we suggest the Board find a middle-ground on many of the aforementioned fare and service changes. Rather than focusing a disproportionate level of service cuts or fare increases on one sector of Metro riders, if any are necessary, we strongly prefer a moderate slate of cuts and increases that is spread more evenly across the entire ridership base.

If the Board must make fare increases and service cuts, we prefer that service cuts represent a very small percentage compared to fare increases. As noted above, we hope that increased jurisdictional contributions and other savings measures can reduce as much as possible the need for fare increase or service cuts.

As you well know, Metro is our communal responsibility. We all reap the benefits when we commute to work, attend cultural events, and visit friends throughout the region. It is this Council's sincerest desire to work with the Board to find more stable funding solutions so that a budget situation such as this one never happens again.

If you have questions about our proposal or would like to discuss this matter further, please contact myself or Carl Seip, Chairman of the Committee on the Budget, through John Pasek in the Office of the Board Secretary.

Sincerely,



Frank DeBernardo, Chair