

Riders' Advisory Council

January 4, 2012

I. Call to Order:

Mr. DeBernardo called the January 2012 meeting of the Riders' Advisory Council to order at 6:37 p.m.

The following members were present:

Frank DeBernardo, Chair (Prince George's County)
David Alpert, District of Columbia Vice Chair
Chris Farrell, Maryland Vice Chair (Montgomery County)
Ben Ball (District of Columbia)
Kelsi Bracmort (District of Columbia)
Stephen Clermont (Fairfax County)
Dharm Guruswamy (At-Large)
Joseph Kitchen (Prince George's County)
Nicole Lawrence-Brown (District of Columbia)
Kara Merrigan (Arlington County)
Pat Sheehan (At-Large/Accessibility Advisory Committee Chair)
Lorraine Silva (Arlington County)
Carol Carter Walker (District of Columbia)
Ron Whiting (Montgomery County)
Victoria Wilder (Montgomery County)
James Wright, Jr. (Prince George's County)

In addition, Carl Seip (At-Large) joined the meeting via phone.

II. Public Comment Period:

There were no comments from members of the public.

Mr. DeBernardo noted that there were several new members of the Council in attendance and asked all if the members to introduce themselves, including the jurisdiction they would be representing on the Council and any other relevant information.

III. Approval of Agenda:

Without objection, the agenda was approved as presented.

IV. Approval of Past Meeting Minutes:

Without objection, the minutes from the December 7, 2011 meeting were approved as presented.

V. Discussion with Metro Board Chair:

Mr. DeBernardo introduced Cathy Hudgins, the Chair of Metro's Board of Directors. Mrs. Hudgins introduced herself, noting that she represents the Hunter Mill District of Fairfax County, which includes the Silver Line Metro extension. She described to the Council how she uses transit to get around both Fairfax County (Fairfax Connector) and the region (Metro).

Mrs. Hudgins noted that the Board has recently undergone a significant change in its membership and that the change has been beneficial. She added that with the change in membership there have also been changes in the Board's policies and procedures. She explained that the Board is now poised to reach out to its stakeholders to get their input on its mission and vision for Metro and, following the adoption of those two items, the Board will then work on goals for the organization. She explained that as Metro moves into FY2013, it anticipates more closely aligning its budget with the Authority's goals.

Mrs. Hudgins also told the Council that Metro is marking one year of Mr. Sarles serving as Metro's permanent General Manager/Chief Executive Officer and that there has been a tremendous amount of work done during his tenure in terms of system repair. She noted that as the Board develops Metro's FY2013 budget, a significant amount of resources will be included in the capital budget for repairs and to address safety issues. She added that the development of the FY2013 budget will include a great deal of discussion among the Board and with stakeholders, especially concerning Metro's fares and fare policies.

Mr. DeBernardo then opened the floor to questions from members of the Council.

Mr. Farrell asked whether Metro has a program to train riders as volunteers to help deal with emergency situations or if there is a possibility to establish such a program. Mrs. Hudgins noted that jurisdictions sponsor their own "CERT" trainings to help residents deal with emergencies, though she would have to look into whether or not Metro offers this training. She added that it is always helpful to have trained individuals available to assist during emergencies.

Mr. Sheehan that the Accessibility Advisory Committee will be bringing some recommendations to the Board concerning changes MetroAccess fares. He also said that the AAC had a series of public meetings concerning the new MetroAccess contract and received a lot of good feedback. He said that the AAC is using that feedback not only to help in structuring the new MetroAccess contract, but also to help the current contractor make improvements in the existing service.

Mr. Ball asked whether a fare increase is an inevitable part of Metro's FY2013 budget. He noted that putting all of the responsibility for closing the budget shortfall on riders doesn't take into account everyone who benefits from the Metro system. Mrs. Hudgins noted that Metro's budget development hasn't been formally presented to the Board, so the Board needs to get a better understanding of the proposed structure of the budget and the costs associated with it. She explained that the General Manager's proposed budget splits the responsibility for covering the shortfall between increased fares and additional subsidy from local governments. She added that the Board needs to look at how the various fare increase proposals would affect riders and at the overall prices for riding Metro. Mrs. Hudgins said that Metro will be going out to have a dialogue with its riders about any fare increases.

Mr. Whiting noted that Metro's budget is a difficult and complicated process and wished Mrs. Hudgins and her colleagues luck with the decisions they will need to make regarding its development. He said that his concern regarding Metro is related to its actions in response to incidents or service disruptions – no direction is given to riders and no one takes control of situations. He said that better training is needed for Metro employees and asked whether or not there is crisis training for Metro employees. Mrs. Hudgins said that it is the Board's understanding that there is training for employees, and that it is waiting for a report from the General Manager on the recent incident. She added that Metro needs to have a plan of how to respond to incidents, to identify who is in charge and how to communicate that information to the public.

Mr. Kitchen said that in his experience, Metro doesn't actively solicit public input, rather it makes changes and then deal with any blowback or reaction. He said that Metro needs to improve its outreach to the people in communities – such as by attending neighborhood meetings to learn about how Metro affects them. He said that he hoped Metro will think about in the coming year is how it will actively engages people in the decision-making process early, rather than waiting for their reaction later. Mrs. Hudgins responded that Metro is expecting to do town hall meetings concerning the budget. She added that Metro also needs to make sure that it is reaching the people it needs to reach with its outreach and to ask whether it is using its existing feedback channels, such as the RAC and the AAC, most effectively.

Ms. Silva said that in the three years that she has been on the RAC, there have been discussions about improving communications, but the latest incident shows that nothing has been done on that front. She said that it doesn't help riders that Metro is increasing its social media communications if it is still neglecting direct communications with riders. Mrs. Hudgins said that she agreed that there are still situations where communications with riders aren't good enough, though she said that she has seen improvements. She said that there still needs to be a comfort level that Metro is able to handle communications if and when serious incidents happen.

Mrs. Walker acknowledged that communications have improved, and noted that she has seen the General Manager and Transit Police chief out in the Metro. She added that Metro isn't doing a good job reaching out to people who aren't connected to the internet or on Facebook or Twitter. She suggested that Metro "go to where the people are" such as at churches or other community gathering places, and added that she thinks the idea of having town hall meetings is a good one.

Mr. Guruswamy noted that it is Metro Board policy to increase fares every two years based on the Consumer Price Index. He said that it may be a good idea to have jurisdictional subsidies increase at the same rate as fares, which would allow for the Board to focus its attention on issues other than how much each jurisdiction will be able to contribute to Metro's budget.

Mr. Guruswamy added that because of the current fiscal climate in Congress, there is a real threat of cuts to federal funding for Metro, and if federal funding is cut, Metro service will deteriorate, especially because the General Manager has said that he will prioritize spending capital funds on safety improvements. He said that Metro needs to tell riders the truth about possible funding cuts and subsequent declines in service levels before problems develop.

Mr. Wright suggested, in the face of limited financial support from the jurisdictions, that Metro look at creative financing options, rather than automatically proposing to increase fares. Mrs. Hudgins noted that Metro funding can often be erratic because no one is fully responsible for funding the system. She added that isn't sure if there will ever be a dedicated, predictable source of revenue for Metro, noting that it had been suggested previously.

Ms. Merrigan said that she is concerned by the lack of professionalism and customer service exhibited by Metro staff, and added that she is also concerned about the amount of overtime that Metro workers put in, both in terms of its effect on their ability to interact well with customers and its effect on Metro's budget. She also express concern about Metro's decision to hire "secret shoppers," and said that the Authority already receives a great deal of feedback from its customers that it should use. Mrs. Hudgins said that the orientation for new RAC members will provide some insight into how the system operates and will also highlight areas where things work well and where things don't work well within the system. Regarding the secret shopper program, she noted that there needs to be a structured way for Metro to see how the system is running.

Dr. Bracmort asked Mrs. Hudgins what the Board needs from the RAC in terms of feedback and how the Council can best assist the Board or if there is anything that the RAC should do differently. She noted that she has been frustrated because issues occur with Metro that the RAC has previously provided recommendations about how to address. Mrs. Hudgins said that the Board does look through the RAC's work and wants to look through the RAC's reports to see the

recommendations and how they were addressed. She noted that the RAC reports to the Board and that while staff facilitates the RAC's recommendations, it's ultimately up to the Board to see that they are addressed. Mr. DeBernardo said that the RAC hopes to facilitate the conversation concerning its recommendations by compiling an annual report, which is up for consideration at later in the meeting.

Ms. Brown asked whether Metro has a preventive maintenance schedule to ensure that the system is maintained in good working order. Mrs. Hudgins said that Metro includes preventative maintenance in its capital budget, though the Board needs to be assure that it is being followed through on. She added that the Board expects to receive a briefing about the recent tunnel incident at an upcoming meeting.

VI. RAC Annual Report:

Without objection, the 2011 Annual Report was approved as presented.

VII. 2012 Council Officer Elections:

Mr. DeBernardo then provided a brief explanation of the election process and then called for nominations for the office of Chair.

Chair:

Ms. Walker moved to nominate Dr. Bracmort for the position of Council Chair. Dr. Bracmort accepted this nomination. There were no other nominations for the position of Council Chair.

Mr. Sheehan moved to close the floor to nominations and elect Dr. Bracmort Chair by acclimation. This motion was seconded by Ms. Silva. Without objection, Dr. Bracmort was elected as Riders' Advisory Council Chair for 2012.

District of Columbia Vice Chair:

Mr. DeBernardo called for nominations for the office of District of Columbia Vice Chair. Mr. Guruswamy nominated Mr. Seip for this position. There were no other nominations for the position of District of Columbia Vice Chair.

Mr. Sheehan moved to close the floor to nominations and to elect Mr. Seip District of Columbia Vice Chair by acclimation. This motion was seconded by Mr. Alpert. Without objection, Mr. Seip was elected as District of Columbia Vice Chair for 2012.

Maryland Vice Chair:

Mr. DeBernardo called for nominations for the office of Maryland Vice Chair. Mr. Alpert nominated Mr. Kitchen for this position. There were no other nominations for the position of

Maryland Vice Chair. Mr. Kitchen gave a brief statement on why he wanted to be considered for the position and noted that if elected he hoped to grow the discourse between Metro's riders and the Council.

Mr. Sheehan moved to close the floor to nominations and to elect Mr. Kitchen Maryland Vice Chair by acclamation. This motion was seconded by Mr. Farrell. Without objection, Mr. Seip was elected as Maryland Vice Chair for 2012.

Virginia Vice Chair:

Mr. DeBernardo called for nominations for the office of Virginia Vice Chair. Mr. Guruswamy nominated Ms. Silva for this position. There were no other nominations for the position of Virginia Vice Chair. Ms. Silva gave a brief statement noting her concerns with Metro's customer service and its communications with riders.

Mr. Sheehan moved to close the floor to nominations and to elect Ms. Silva Virginia Vice Chair by acclamation. This motion was seconded by Mr. Guruswamy. Without objection, Mr. Seip was elected as Virginia Vice Chair for 2012.

Ms. Walker thanked the outgoing officers for their hard work on behalf of the Council and noted the tremendous progress they had achieved during their tenures.

VIII. Open Mic:

Mr. DeBernardo then opened the floor for Council members' comments and questions as part of the "Open Mic" period.

Mr. Ball told the Council that his pet issue was transit access to the region's airports. He said that he would be interested in having an agenda item on this topic at a future meeting.

Ms. Lawrence-Brown asked what plans Metro has made to respond to the District of Columbia's increase in population and also how it plans to use social media in its communications with customers.

Mr. Alpert noted that the Council has been its most effective when it has been able to dive into issues more deeply, often by meeting in smaller groups. He explained that these smaller groups have enabled the Council to develop well-thought out positions on items such as Metro governance and the Metro budget, along with other issues.

Mr. Sheehan told the Council that some of the issues being explored by the Accessibility Advisory Committee (AAC) may be of interest to the RAC, such as lighting in stations, railcar interior design, access to bus stops and elevator "auto dispatch." He said that it is important that

the AAC has the opportunity to share its thoughts on issues with the RAC and that he wants to make sure that the RAC stays informed about the AAC's recommendations so that the RAC can possibly endorse some of those recommendations as well.

Ms. Walker suggested that the leadership solicit ideas for meeting agendas from members and not rely exclusively in items that are staff-generated. She said that she would also like the Council to look at its bylaws regarding the timing of elections, since new members are appointed and then are asked to vote on candidates they haven't had the opportunity to get to know. She added that she would also like the Council to look at Metro's budget, specifically its ridership projections, to ensure that Metro doesn't make decisions that will result in driving away riders.

Mr. Guruswamy said that he understood members' frustration about not having the Council's recommendations adopted, and added that there is the opportunity for the Council to influence Metro policy, but it requires members to be involved.

Ms. Wilder said that she agreed with Mr. Alpert in terms of the Council's ability to get things accomplished by working in small groups. She said that she looks forward to greater outreach to riders by the Council in the coming year.

Mr. Farrell said that there is frustration because the Council doesn't have a direct constituency to address. He explained that it can have an impact with on Metro through the public hearing process or also hold its own community meetings.

Mr. Ball asked what type of communications the Council has with Metro. Mr. DeBernardo explained that the Council will approve resolutions or letters to the Board and that the Council chair delivers a report to the Board on a monthly basis. Mr. Ball noted that all of these avenues for communications sound good, but none require Metro to provide an answer to the Council.

Mr. DeBernardo then handed the gavel over to Dr. Bracmort, who adjourned the meeting at 8:30 p.m. without objection.