

Riders' Advisory Council

March 4, 2020

Members Present:

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:

John Pasek, Assistant Board Secretary, Metro

Call to Order:

Mr. Kierig called the March 2020 meeting of the Riders' Advisory Council to order at 6:19 p.m. He noted that there were not enough members present yet to take action.

FY2021 Budget Comments:

Mr. Kierig then reviewed the draft of the RAC's comments on Metro's Proposed FY2021 Operating Budget which Mr. Reusch had circulated previously.

He confirmed with members that the RAC was generally supportive of Metro's proposals to reduce weekend headways, partially restore late-night service and improve weekend frequencies on Metrobus and MetroExtra.

Ms. Mason said that the RAC should also note its opposition to the proposal to charge peak fares during late night weekend service. Mr. Pasek explained that the Virginia Board members who put that proposal out for public comment were not necessarily supportive of the idea, but wanted to gauge the public's reaction. Ms. Kortum noted that this topic is addressed in the section of the letter that addresses proposed fare changes.

In response to a comment from Mr. Pasek, Ms. Kortum suggested that the letter include an executive summary of the RAC's recommendations.

There was further discussion about including the RAC's opposition to charging peak fares post-midnight in both the "Operating Service Proposals" and "Fare Proposals" portion of the document. Ms. Mason suggested that the RAC should "oppose" this proposal, rather than just "not support" it. Ms. Kortum noted that the RAC was also opposed to Metro charging peak fares between 5 and 6 a.m., assuming it reduces service to run only every twelve minutes. Mr. Kierig noted that was included in the draft letter.

Mr. Kierig told members that the letter also expressed the RAC's concerns about proposals to reduce bus service and the impacts of those changes on low-income riders, and that the RAC isn't convinced that low ridership is a sufficient reason to eliminate bus routes.

Mr. Keirig further reviewed the "Fare Proposals" section of the letter, explaining that the RAC's position would be that cautious about fare increases while in favor of fare simplification, and that it is not convinced that a weekend flat fare would provide a significant ridership incentive.

Ms. Kortum noted that she attended the District of Columbia public hearing, which was very well attended. She explained that the hearing was split between the two rooms, the Meeting Room and the Board Room, to address issues of crowding. She said that the dominant theme of public comments was to reconsider the proposals for bus route eliminations. She added that she heard very few comments about either rail service or fare proposals.

Mr. Pasek said that the vast majority of comments at all of the public hearings – in D.C., Maryland and Virginia, were related to proposed bus service eliminations. He noted that there were also comments at the Maryland and Virginia hearings from MetroAccess users and members of Metro's union. In response to a question from Ms. Kortum, Mr. Pasek said that there have been over 12,000 responses to the online survey, though he did not have survey results, since the public comment period was still open.

Mr. Pasek also provided some information on the feedback given to Metro's "street teams," the contractors who provided in-person outreach at Metro stations and other locations. This feedback included:

- Support for improved weekend service;
- Improved service justified a fare increase;
- Concerns that Metro will raise fares regardless of rider input;
- Opposition to fare increases because of either fare evasion, that fare increases disproportionately hurt lower-income riders and because of service inconsistencies;
- Appreciation of proposals for lower fares or weekend flat fares and increased late-night service;
- Concerns about proposed elimination of specific bus routes.

Mr. Sheehan noted that the public comment period had been extended until March 9th owing to accessibility issues with the budget documents posted online. He added that he also heard comments at the public hearing about how Metro's proposed bus route eliminations didn't match with the recommendations contained in the Bus Transformation Project (BTP) study.

In response to a question from Ms. Mason, Mr. White said that the BTP didn't directly address individual bus routes but was focused rather on network-wide improvements to bus service.

Ms. Mason suggested that the letter should mention the inconsistency between the recommendations of the BTP and Metro's proposal to eliminate bus routes and suggest further

analysis on ways to improve bus route efficiencies. She also suggested that the letter to the Board should highlight the number of riders who spoke out against the proposed bus service reductions and the dangers of eliminating bus service while Metro is trying to rebuild ridership.

Mr. Kierig suggested adding the following sentence: “The Riders’ Advisory Council views the elimination of these routes and the way discussions of service changes were handled is in serious conflict with the goals of the Bus Transformation Project.” Ms. Mason also suggested including information in the letter about the number and intensity of public comments received that opposed bus route eliminations. Mr. Sheehan suggested adding in that several Advisory Neighborhood Commissioners, representing several thousand people, also commented in opposition to the proposed bus service reductions.

Ms. Kortum asked whether there had been any analysis of the District of Columbia’s proposal to provide residents with a \$100/month transit subsidy and its potential impacts on ridership. Mr. Pasek responded that while he had seen information about the proposal’s details, he hadn’t yet seen any analysis of possible ridership or budgetary impacts. Ms. Kortum gave further details on the legislation and how it would work. She added that transportation researchers are interested in how people would change their transportation choices if this legislation were implemented. Mr. Pasek also noted that if the legislation were approved, it wouldn’t go into effect until the beginning of the District’s next Fiscal Year, which begins on October 1st.

Ms. Kortum said that her interest in this legislation stemmed from the fact that the transit benefit would first be offered to low-income individuals, and that those individuals are the same people who would be disproportionately impacted by Metro’s proposed bus route eliminations. She said that this legislation may increase ridership enough on the routes proposed for elimination that they wouldn’t need to be cancelled.

Ms. Mason suggested that the RAC include in its letter a recommendation that Metro hold off on route eliminations until seeing the impact of legislation.

Ms. Kortum said that she would be hesitant to include such a recommendation because there is no guarantee that the legislation will be approved and even if it were approved, it would only apply to District of Columbia residents, and Metro is proposing route eliminations and restructurings throughout its network, including in Maryland and Virginia.

Mr. Pasek noted that, because it has a limited number of buses and operators to provide service, Metro may have to defer service improvements in order to maintain service on routes proposed for elimination. In response to comments from Council members, Mr. Pasek reviewed the portion of the legislation that detailed the priorities on how funding would be distributed to D.C. residents, first to residents making less than 300% of the federal poverty line, and then to residents making more money.

Mr. Kierig then turned to the “Fare Proposals” section of the letter. He asked members about their thoughts on the proposed fare surcharge for using the Dulles Airport station. Mr. White said that he is familiar with this type of surcharge based on his international travels.

Ms. Kortum said that she didn’t understand why this surcharge would be applied to passengers at Dulles but not at Reagan National. She added that airport surcharges in other cities are often applied to express airport service, not a regular service like will be provided to Dulles Airport. She said that this surcharge would also be punitive to airport workers. Ms. Mason agreed that the proposal didn’t make sense because it wouldn’t apply to trips to/from Reagan National Airport. Mr. Sheehan agreed that this surcharge would be punitive to airport workers.

There was agreement to include the RAC’s opposition to a Dulles Airport surcharge in its letter to the Board.

Mr. Kierig then reviewed the proposed Metrobus fare changes and the Council’s position on those proposals, including supporting decreasing the cost of the 7-Day Regional Bus Pass and opposes a 25¢ surcharge for paying or loading SmarTrip cards with cash on the bus.

Mr. Pasek said that the letter did not address the proposal to increase fares on MetroExtra limited-stop routes by \$1.00 (to \$3.00). After discussion, members agreed that the Council was opposed to the proposed increase in MetroExtra fares.

Kenneth Mitchell said that the extra fare on MetroExtra routes may have the unintended consequence of discouraging riders from using MetroExtra routes.

Mr. Kierig reviewed other points in the draft letter, including the RAC’s support for an increase in the bus/rail transfer discount to \$2.00.

Ms. Mason said that she wanted to make sure that the RAC included comments in the executive summary about the amount and intensity of public comment opposed to bus route eliminations.

Approval of Agenda:

Now that the RAC had a quorum, Mr. Kierig asked for the approval of the agenda. The agenda was approved as presented without objection.

Approval of Minutes:

Ms. Kortum moved, seconded by Mr. Sheehan, approval of the minutes, as corrected. The minutes were approved without objection.

Mr. Kierig then asked for a motion to approve the RAC’s FY2021 budget comments letter as revised. Ms. Kortum moved approval of the letter, seconded by Mr. Sheehan. This motion was approved unanimously.

New Business:

Blue/Orange/Silver Capacity Study:

Mr. Kierig noted that there had been a meeting of the Blue/Orange/Silver Line capacity study since the RAC's last meeting, but that he was unable to attend.

Late Night Mobility Study:

Mr. Kierig noted that Ms. Kortum had volunteered to be the RAC's representative on this study. Mr. Pasek said that, based on his conversations with staff, the study would be of fairly limited duration and that data collection for the study has already begun. He added that there would be three stakeholder meetings in mid-/late March – one meeting for business improvement districts and geographically-based organizations, one for employer associations and labor union groups and one for rider advocacy groups.

Mr. Kierig moved to appoint Ms. Kortum to the panel representing the RAC. This motion was seconded by Ms. Washington. Ms. Mason said that she would be willing to serve on the committee if a second member was needed.

Ms. Mason asked whether the AAC was asked to participate in the study. Mr. Pasek said that he would need to check.

Mr. Pasek then provided an update to the Council on behalf of Kirti Suri, staff aide to D.C. Councilmember Robert White noting that CM White drafted a letter, signed by all members of the D.C. Council opposing proposed bus service reductions. Ms. Suri's update also noted that Mr. White Committee on Facilities and Procurement held a performance oversight hearing on WMATA that reviewed Metro's Proposed FY2021 budget, its performance metrics and concerns about the Metro Transit Police Department. Ms. Suri's update also informed the Council that CM White co-introduced legislation to provide transit subsidies to DC residents and funding for bus improvements.

Mr. White said that, following up on Ms. Mason's comments about how Metro tracks bus riders, that Metro is able to determine ridership from farebox counts. There was further discussion of whether or not Metro tracks bus ridership by individuals with disabilities. Mr. Sheehan noted that there is a policy adopted by the AAC to review bus service changes in light of whether or not they would impact the Metro service area.

Mr. Sheehan also told the Council that over the coming few months, Metro will be implementing a program that allows MetroAccess users to take trips using transportation network companies, such as Uber, in order to reduce the number of passengers using MetroAccess. Mr. Sheehan further discussed MetroAccess scheduling and proposed improvements.

Mr. Pasek noted that Metro also uses automatic passenger counters to determine Metrobus ridership, which count the number of passengers entering and exiting the bus.

Mr. Sheehan explained that MetroAccess customers have cards that allow them to use fixed-route rail and bus service for free, which also provide a count of riders with disabilities using certain routes.

Ms. Mason noted that there is the possibility of RAC elections next month and that the RAC is still short of members, so if anyone is interested, he or she should submit an application.

Adjournment:

Without objection, the meeting was adjourned at 7:44 p.m.

DRAFT