

Metro Riders' Advisory Council

February 2, 2011

I. Call to Order:

Mr. DeBernardo called the February 2, 2011 meeting of the Metro Riders' Advisory Council to order at 6:32 p.m.

The following members were present:

Frank DeBernardo, Chairman, Prince George's County

David Alpert, District of Columbia Vice-Chair

Penny Everline, Virginia Vice-Chair, Arlington County

Christopher Farrell, Maryland Vice-Chair, Montgomery County

Kelsi Bracmort, District of Columbia

Jamie Bresner, City of Alexandria

Stephen Clermont, Fairfax County

Sharon Conn, Prince George's County

Patricia Daniels, District of Columbia

Kenneth DeGraff, District of Columbia

Joseph Kitchen, Prince George's County

Chris Schmitt, Fairfax County

Patrick Sheehan, At-Large/Accessibility Advisory Committee Chairman

Lorraine Silva, Arlington County

Carol Carter Walker, District of Columbia

Ronald Whiting, Montgomery County

Diana Zinkl, District of Columbia

Mr. DeBernardo welcomed the two new members of the Council, Joseph Kitchen and Stephen Clermont.

II. Public Comment Period:

Bill Orleans congratulated Mr. Sarles on his new position as permanent CEO and General Manager. He noted his concerns about Metro's recently-instituted bag inspection program.

Mr. Sarles responded that the Board would be discussing the bag inspection policy at a meeting the next week, but at the moment, the program will continue.

Dr. Bracmort arrived at 6:35 p.m.

III. Approval of Agenda:

Without objection, the agenda was approved as presented.

IV. Q&A with Metro General Manager/Chief Executive Officer:

Mr. DeBernardo introduced Richard Sarles, Metro's General Manager and Chief Executive Officer. He congratulated him on his appointment to the position and welcomed him to the meeting.

Mr. Sarles noted that he intended, as permanent GM/CEO, to continue the work he has done over the past ten months. He explained that his priority is safety and that Metro has made investments over the past year to improve safety. He said that those investments will continue and that he expects that they will bear fruit.

Ms. Zinkl and Mr. Sheehan arrived at 6:39 p.m.

Mr. Sarles explained that Metro will be working to rebuild the rail system, which will involve much more aggressively using service outages to perform maintenance activities, with the ultimate goal of providing a better system for riders.

Mr. Alpert arrived at 6:40 p.m.

Mr. Sarles also discussed the need for Metro to maintain its capital funding in order to return to a state of good repair. He said that it is critical that the capital funding provided by the federal government remain in place, and that he is very concerned about some of the proposals being made by this Congress that do not include that funding.

He also discussed customer service, and noted that he has started visiting with customers at rail stations. Mr. Sarles said that the two things that were most mentioned to him by customers were litter and debris on in the rail system and indifferent or rude employees. He told the Council that Metro will be reminding its riders about its ban on eating and drinking. Mr. Sarles also explained that while most Metro employees provide good customer service, there are some that do not. He told the Council that part of Metro's problem is that it doesn't get enough specifics when customers report a problem to identify the particular employee. He explained that Metro would be reinstating its "secret shopper" program this year to evaluate customer service and that Metro will also be receiving an independent assessment of its customer service call center to measure how effectively it's operated.

Mr. Sarles also noted that Metro has hired an industrial designer to help with the design of its 7000-series railcars.

Mr. DeBernardo then opened the floor for questions from members.

Ms. Everline noted that because of additional expenses in Metro's capital budget associated with safety repairs, there is not money for expansion of the rail fleet. She asked how Mr. Sarles saw Metro coping with that situation. Mr. Sarles said that Metro is trying to deal with the most immediate concerns, which involve safety and state of good repair, which means that there is not enough money to purchase additional railcars. He said that Metro cannot expand its rail fleet unless it can convince the jurisdictions to provide additional funding.

Mr. Alpert noted his concern that in terms of the proposed seating arrangements for the new railcars, there wasn't attention to addressing capacity issues. He asked whether a decision had been made about seating layout for the new railcars. Mr. Sarles responded that, based on earlier input, Metro has decided on transverse seating for the new railcars, but the cars' design allows for a change to longitudinal seating at some point in the future if it is warranted.

Mr. Bresner asked about the likelihood of Metro's federal funding being reduced. Mr. Sarles said that it is a very legitimate concern given the current Congressional makeup. He added that Metro needs to address both its \$150 million in annual federal capital funding along with the reauthorization of the federal transportation funding bill.

Mr. Sheehan asked Mr. Sarles to remind Metro staff to consult with the Accessibility Advisory Committee on issues that affect senior citizens and individuals with disabilities.

Mr. Whiting noted that in previous Council discussions on Metro's budget, there has been debate on the issue of raising fares vs. cutting service to balance the budget and asked which of those options Mr. Sarles preferred. Mr. Sarles noted that both options are difficult and that his preference is to try and preserve service when possible.

Mr. Clermont asked what kind of a campaign Metro was planning to advocate for continued federal funding. Mr. Sarles said that Metro is working on a campaign and noted that the region's business community recognizes Metro's importance to the region, and that they are an important ally in helping Metro maintain its funding.

Mr. Kitchen noted an *Examiner* article that stated that Metro has included additional employees in its proposed FY2012 budget and asked Mr. Sarles to address this issue. Mr. Sarles said that most of the positions are for capital projects, and therefore do not affect the operating budget. He noted that most of these positions have been previously authorized by the Board. Mr. Sarles also explained that due to an error, 40 positions were omitted from the count in the current year's budget.

Mr. DeGraff asked Mr. Sarles how the police chief intends to improve the presence of public safety officers within the system. Mr. Sarles explained that Metro has introduced the “MetroStat” program to more closely examine crime trends. He added that the police chief has redeployed officers from desk positions and from other details to particular trouble spots such as at Gallery Place and L’Enfant Plaza.

Ms. Silva asked whether Metro still needed to fill vacant positions in its elevator and escalator department. Mr. Sarles responded that he believed that most supervisory positions have been filled, though he wasn’t sure if all mechanic positions have been filled. He explained that there would be a presentation to the Board at next week’s Customer Service and Operations Committee meeting to provide more details about how Metro is addressing elevator and escalator reliability. He added that Rodrigo Bitar, the new elevator/escalator chief is using maintenance management data to more carefully pinpoint where Metro should focus its efforts.

Ms. Zinkl asked that during his tenure Mr. Sarles also focus on the challenges faced by Metrobus. She also asked whether Metro has looked at barriers between the platform and tracks at Metrorail station. Mr. Sarles said that such barriers would be very expensive and that Metro must first focus on basic maintenance and, following that, the expansion of the railcar fleet. He said that he would be interested in seeing New York City’s experience with such barriers, if they decide to install them.

Mr. Schmitt asked where Metro stood in terms of the development of a collision avoidance system and returning Metrorail to automatic operation. Mr. Sarles said that Metro must first replace all of its track circuit modules, which it has begun doing. He also explained that the National Transportation Safety Board recommended that Metro conduct a system analysis of its Automatic Train Control system, and that Metro won’t go back to automatic operation until that is completed.

Dr. Bracmort asked whether Mr. Sarles whether he had done any outreach to Metrobus riders and about his plans for the bus system. Mr. Sarles said that Metro is getting new buses, which improve both reliability and the customer experience. He added that Metro will be working actively with the District of Columbia and other jurisdictions for bus priority to help speed up bus service. Mr. Sarles explained that Metro will also be looking at the effectiveness of its customer call center, which has an impact on bus riders’ experiences.

Dr. Conn said that Metro needs a better information campaign to explain to customers how to purchase bus passes, especially now that they are available only on SmarTrip® cards. She said that she would also like to see enhanced customer service and call center staff during large events or emergencies such as last week’s snowstorm. She noted that customers suffered from an inability to get information about Metro service.

Ms. Daniels discussed the need for Metro to better inform riders about bus route detours. Mr. Farrell asked whether Mr. Sarles had any information about the effect of fare increases on Metro ridership. Mr. Sarles responded that Metro's Chief Financial Officer would be presenting information on that topic to the Board the following week.

Mr. DeBernardo thanked Mr. Sarles for attending the meeting.

V. Proposed FY2012 Metro Budget:

Carol Dillon Kissal, Metro's Deputy General Manager for Administration and Chief Financial Officer, provided the Council an overview of Metro's proposed FY2012 budget.

Following Ms. Kissal's presentation, Mr. DeBernardo opened the floor for questions.

Mr. Schmitt asked if Metro had gotten any feedback from the jurisdictions regarding the increased subsidy request included in the proposed budget. Ms. Kissal said that the Jurisdictional Coordinating Committee, which is a group composed of staff from Metro's partner jurisdictions has asked some questions about service levels, specifically trying to find areas for greater efficiencies. She said that she had not yet gotten the response that jurisdictions would "absolutely not" be able to provide additional subsidies.

Mr. Alpert asked Ms. Kissal when she might have more information on whether or not the jurisdictions will be able to provide additional subsidies. He also asked her opinion on what she would like to see advocates to do help Metro receive sufficient funding.

Ms. Kissal provided an overview of the budget discussions that will be taking place over the coming months:

- February – service levels and expenditures
- March – capital program
- April – revenues

She said that the Board needs to make budget decisions in May. She also noted that she and Mr. Sarles will be testifying in front of various legislative bodies in the coming months. With regard to advocacy, she urged the Council to be as vocal as possible on Metro's behalf. She said that she also thought that Metro would be holding public hearings as part of the budget process and that the Council can provide advocacy on behalf of riders during those hearings.

Mr. Kitchen asked whether Ms. Kissal thought that Metro fare levels were at the point where riders wouldn't pay higher fares or whether Metro fares can, in fact go higher. Ms. Kissal

responded that because many Metro riders receive transit subsidies, Metro's "price points" are somewhat skewed compared to other transit properties. She noted that many factors affect the price people will pay for transit service, so that she can't fully answer that question. She added that Metro does expect its ridership to increase because of continuing regional growth.

Ms. Everline commended the CEO for developing a budget that, at a minimum, asks the jurisdictions for a level of subsidy necessary to avoid cuts in service. She said that she looks forward to further examining the details of Metro's proposed budget. Ms. Kissal noted that Metro is also looking to reduce costs as part of the proposed budget through various measures, such as implementing additional technology at parking lots to reduce staffing levels and performing a health care dependency audit.

Dr. Conn noted that the presentation showed Metro deferring some retirement contributions and asked how it was able to do this since these are annual, ongoing payments. Ms. Kissal said that Metro is obligated to fund its employee retirement agreements and will do so.

Dr. Conn also asked if Metro outsources any of its departmental functions. Ms. Kissal responded that Metro has looked at outsourcing certain functions and gave the example of cash counting as a function that has been outsourced by Metro. She noted that Metro examines what it considers its "core services" and reviews outsourcing functions that are not those core services.

Ms. Zinkl asked if the Council can get more information about the number of riders that receive SmartBenefits. Ms. Kissal said that she thought that there were around 250,000 people enrolled in the program, which includes both riders who receive a transit subsidy and those who receive pre-tax benefits. She said that she would follow up with more information.

Mr. DeBernardo thanked Ms. Kissal for her presentation and noted that the Council has a Budget Committee established and looked forward to providing the Board with recommendations on the budget.

Mr. DeBernardo noted that Mr. Seip had suggested that the Council approve sending a letter to Metro's funding jurisdictions suggesting that they increase their subsidy levels to Metro to fully fund its FY2012 budget request. He explained that the Council sent a similar letter to the jurisdictions last year.

Mr. Alpert moved that the Council send a letter asking for jurisdictions to provide the level of subsidy shown in the General Manager's Proposed FY2012 Budget. Ms. Everline seconded this motion.

In favor: Mr. DeBernardo, Mr. Alpert, District of Columbia, Ms. Everline, Mr. Farrell, Dr. Bracmort,

Mr. Bresner, Dr. Conn, Ms. Daniels, Mr. DeGraff, Mr. Kitchen, Mr. Schmitt, Fairfax County
Mr. Sheehan, Ms. Silva, Ms. Walker, Mr. Whiting

Opposed: None

Abstentions: None

This motion was approved.

VI. Approval of Past Meeting Minutes:

Mr. Alpert moved approval of the January 5, 2011 meeting minutes as presented. This motion was seconded by Dr. Conn.

Without objection, the minutes of the January 5, 2011 Riders' Advisory Council meeting were approved as presented. Ms. Daniels abstained from voting.

VII. Questions and Comments on R.A.C. and AAC Chair Reports:

Mr. DeBernardo asked if any members had questions on either his or Mr. Sheehan's report.

Ms. Everline asked whether the Council would have the opportunity to reiterate its position on bag inspections before it this issue is discussed by the Board. After discussion, Ms. Everline moved that the Council resubmit its previous letter to the Board on this issue, noting that Mr. Sarles has said that he plans to continue these inspections and asking the Board to consider the Council's recommendations.

This motion was seconded by Mr. Alpert.

Mr. Alpert suggested adding a sentence to the letter discussing the roles of the CEO and Board in terms of setting policy and noting that this is a topic that the Council feels rises to the level of a policy decision that should be made by the Board.

Ms. Walker said that her understanding of Mr. Sarles' comments was that he would stand by his decision to continue the inspections but would respect the Board's direction if it decided differently.

Dr. Conn said that she wasn't sure if the Board would override Mr. Sarles since they have given him the title and responsibilities of Chief Executive Officer.

Mr. DeBernardo noted that there was discussion by Board members at the previous month's meeting that framed the issue as one of security vs. civil liberties and that it is important that the Council reiterate and clarify its position on this issue and the reasoning behind it.

Ms. Walker noted that the Board has the ultimate authority to decide on what issues can or cannot be delegated to the GM/CEO.

Mr. DeBernardo added that Board members, in their discussion at the January Board meeting, implied that there was a credible threat against Metro, and said that the Council should reiterate in its letter that the Metro Transit Police have repeatedly said that there are no credible threats against Metro.

Ms. Silva said that she considered bag inspections are a policy decision which should be under the purview of the Board.

Ms. Everline restated her motion.

In favor: Mr. DeBernardo, Mr. Alpert, Ms. Everline, Mr. Farrell, Mr. Bresner, Dr. Bracmort, Dr. Conn, Mr. DeGraff, Mr. Schmitt, Ms. Silva, Ms. Walker, Mr. Whiting, Ms. Zinkl

Opposed: Ms. Daniels, Mr. Kitchen

Abstentions: Mr. Sheehan

VII. Committee Meeting Planning:

Dr. Conn noted that the first meeting of the Council's Elevator/Escalator meeting will be on Monday, February 7th at 6 p.m. She noted that the new head of the Metro's elevator/escalator department will be in attendance at that meeting.

Ms. Everline noted that there would be a Bus Committee meeting at 7 p.m. on February 7th following the Elevator/Escalator Committee meeting. She told members that the meeting would cover the Metrobus organizational structure and recent changes to Metrobus fare media.

VIII. Introductions:

Noting that there were several new members, Mr. DeBernardo asked all of the members to introduce themselves by name, occupation and jurisdiction of residence. He said that at the next month's meeting, the Council would talk about members' interests.

IX. Adjournment:

Without objection, the meeting was adjourned at 8:30 p.m.