

## Riders' Advisory Council July 6, 2011

### I. Call to Order:

Mr. DeBernardo called the July 2011 meeting of the Metro Riders' Advisory Council to order at 6:35 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  
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 Chair  
Deborah Titus, Fairfax County  
Carol Carter Walker, District of Columbia  
Victoria Wilder, Montgomery County  
Diana Zinkl, District of Columbia

Arrival times for members who arrived after the beginning of the meeting are noted in the minutes.

### II. Public Comment Period:

Kenny Bey discussed his concerns about disorderly conduct by students on the Metro. He said that he came to the Council to offer a solution and noted that he had experience in working with high-risk students. He said that there is an opportunity to engage students, as well as to get buy-in from stakeholders, such as public and charter schools, as well as from students on changing behavior. He suggested creating a campaign with Metro and the D.C. Public Schools where students can identify and model good quality behavior. He also suggested having student ambassadors to help address behavior issues. Ms. Walker noted that something should be done in concert with the Metropolitan Police Department, D.C. Public Schools and other appropriate agencies, including the Metro Transit Police. Mr. DeBernardo added that a few Council members were working with the Metro Transit Police to set up a public safety forum, possibly with a back-to-school theme.

III. Approval of Agenda:

Without objection, the agenda was approved as presented.

IV. Approval of Past Meeting Minutes:

Without objection, the June 2011 meeting minutes were approved as presented.

V. Metro Communications:

Dan Stessel, Metro's new Director of Communications introduced himself. He told the Council that he has been with Metro since late May and had previously worked in communications at New Jersey Transit and at Amtrak, meaning that he has experience working with transportation operations. He also told the Council that his role is somewhat different than his predecessor's, who focused mostly on working with the media. He explained that his role is as "Director of Communications," which would also include additional functions such as communication with customers and to have more of a two-way dialogue with Metro riders and other stakeholders. Mr. Stessel also noted that his office will be hiring a "manager of social media" to monitor and manage Metro's presence on Twitter, Facebook, Foursquare and other social media sites within the next few weeks. He said that Metro wants to be a leader in the transportation field in terms of reaching out to customers via social media.

Mr. Stessel also explained the recently-launched "Metro Forward" information campaign that tells the story of the work Metro is doing to rebuild the system and improve reliability. He noted the need for Metro to more fully explain the work that it is doing when it makes repairs, and provided the example of the work that Metro does when rebuilding its escalators.

Mr. Stessel also explained that Metro would be working to improve its customer communications, especially as it relates to bus service. He said that while Metro has real-time alerts for its rail service, it is missing a real-time alert service for bus customers, and is working to develop such a system to provide real-time information about bus service.

Mr. Stessel noted that Metro has no good way to send out more detailed information about situations that affect bus routes such as construction or other detours. Mr. Stessel explained that Metro essentially has two ways to get information out to its riders: through eAlerts and through press releases. He said that press releases are written with the media as an audience, meaning they aren't particularly user-friendly and many riders don't sign up to receive them. He said that what is missing from Metro's set of communication tools is "advisories," which are something between eAlerts and press releases – longer-form messages that can be sent out via email. He said that these advisories would explain not only what was happening but why something happened, such as why an escalator is out or why a bus route was detoured.

Dr. Bracmort arrived at 6:49 p.m.

Mr. Stessel also explained that he and his staff are working on improving communication with rail riders, specifically by improving the quality of the alerts sent out. He said that these were initially designed to be “simple and quick” to send, but that may not be enough for customers anymore.

He also noted that once the position of “manager of social media” is filled, the “Metro Forward” blog will become much richer in content. He told Council members that Metro has increased its two-way communication with customers, by welcoming comments on its Facebook page and responding to tweets on Twitter. He also explained how Metro is using Twitter to help it identify cars with malfunctioning air conditioning units.

Mr. Stessel explained that all of the activities that he’s listed are part of a larger communications strategy that includes meet-and-greet sessions with the General Manager/CEO and other senior staff, engaging customers through focused research, such as what Metro did with its proposed station naming policy and new railcar design and revised system map. He said that all of these activities are designed to get customers more invested in Metro.

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

Mr. Farrell asked about communications to customers in other languages. Mr. Stessel said that currently he is only hiring two positions, so these additional communications will likely be English-only for now, though he can look at making the job announcement note that Spanish language skills are preferred. He also said that Metro has the option of sending out advisories that direct users back to the Metro homepage for language translation, especially since Metro has recently expanded the translations on its webpage.

Mr. Clermont said that the more information Metro provides, the greater the possibility there is for customers to become irritated with information overload. He added that information is great, but that it isn’t a substitute for more consistent and reliable performance. Mr. Stessel said that he understands Mr. Clermont’s comments and noted that Metro has worked to get its capital improvement plan underway and that, in this case, communications are the trailing part of Metro’s efforts. He explained that Metro needs to clearly explain the “whys” behind the rebuilding process and manage customers’ expectations while the rebuilding is going on. He added that by communicating with customers, Metro is able to let them know that Metro is aware of their concerns and that it is working to address them.

Mr. Schmitt said that improving communications efforts is only a “window-dressing” if there isn’t a culture of communication to sustain it and, in fact, Metro sets up a dissonance when it tries to communicate without that culture in place. He also said that Metro needs to communicate with its customers “like adults” and be specific in its communications – rather than using generic words like “incident,” tell riders what happened, such as “door problems” or “bomb threat. Mr. Stessel explained that Metro is working to give riders a fuller picture of what happens when there is a service interruption. He provided the example of a recent explanation and apology to customers which was issued the previous week following the derailment of a piece of construction equipment on the Green line and a switch problem on the Red line that explained more fully to customers what happened. Mr. Stessel noted that this type of communication was new to Metro. He added that an “advisory” system will help Metro get information into the hands of customers more quickly in such situations.

Ms. Wilder suggested that Metro's press releases have more informative titles. She said that currently, they are very generic and don't provide much specific information. Mr. Stessel explained that he has been working to improve the amount and quality of information available through Metro's website, including information pertaining to press releases and would look into Ms. Wilder's suggestion about improving their titles.

Ms. Walker noted that she had signed up to receive eAlerts when there were problems on the rail system and that the number of alerts issued quickly became overwhelming. She suggested that Metro set a threshold for alerts to try and avoid this problem. She added that she admired the recent change in direction with regards to Metro's communication in terms of increased outreach to riders. Ms. Walker said that she does still have concerns about how Metro gets information to people who don't have access to the internet or to smartphones, as they will continue to rely on information in railcars and on buses. Mr. Stessel acknowledged that there will still be customers that will not be able to receive information over the internet and so will still need to get information on paper, through flyers or signs. He did note that cell phone penetration rates are very high, which offers an opportunity to get information to customers using that method. He added that Metro is looking to provide more information to customers while they're on the train and explained the enhanced information displays planned for the new 7000 series railcars as an example.

Mr. Bresner stressed the need for Metro to be consistent with its communications. He also said that with regards to Metro's following riders' Twitter feeds, Metro needs to let people know what follow-up action it takes with the feedback and information that it receives. He said that he understands that Metro isn't able to respond to every comment or tweet, but that customers would appreciate some kind of follow-up. Mr. Stessel suggested that Metro may be able to issue a daily "recap" of comments/tweets received and how they were addressed. He added that regarding specific follow-up on fixing railcars with malfunctioning air-conditioning, it depends what needs to be fixed as to how quickly the issue can be addressed. He also noted that passengers can use the intercom on the train to report malfunctioning cars to the train operator. Mr. Bresner said that if that's the case, Metro needs to make it clearer to passengers that the in-car intercoms can be used to report those kinds of things, rather than only for emergency communications.

Ms. Titus asked about communications to customers with hearing impairments, specifically whether anything can be done to sync audio announcements with the visual messages that are displayed on the platform information signs. She also suggested that Metro reach out to riders concerning emergency preparedness. Mr. Stessel said that the topic of emergency communications hadn't been raised with him yet during his time with Metro. He added that the electronic platform signs are controlled by the Rail Operations Control Center. He noted that technology has evolved since the initial rollout of these signs so there may be opportunities in the future to integrate text and speech. He said that other transit systems, including New Jersey Transit, are currently rolling out this technology and it is used at airports.

Dr. Bracmort asked whether Metro had ever considered establishing a separate Twitter account to alert riders to bus changes and detours. She asked whether Metro worked with local departments of transportation to disseminate information about construction projects that would impact bus service. She

added that she would like for Metro to develop a “generic” detour sign that could be filled in on a case-by-case basis and posted at bus stops when there is a planned detour, similar to how the District of Columbia puts up temporary “No Parking” signs. Dr. Bracmort said that she would also like Metro to increase its use of the audio announcement systems on the bus to push out information and to also have bus operators disseminate information. Mr. Stessel said that Metro is working on developing an alert system for buses as he had explained earlier. He noted that sign installation and bus operator duties are outside of his areas of responsibility.

Ms. Zinkl said that she thinks that Metro can better utilize the resources it already has out in the field, specifically its employees, to improve its communication. She said that Metro should communicate better with its employees to let them know what’s going on and then they will be better able to disseminate that information. Ms. Zinkl also discussed bus detour signs that Metro had recently installed and suggested that Metro try and make those signs more user-friendly by decreasing the amount of text on the signs. She also suggested that Metro employees should ride the bus more. Mr. Stessel said that the new bus communications employees will be required to ride the bus for their first two weeks on the job to help familiarize them with the bus system. He added that, with regard to getting information out to customers, the issue is not so much the tools that Metro has available, but rather the time required for Metro to get the best information and to then relay that information to customers. He said that, for example, Metro needs time to understand the severity of a delay before it can communicate that information to customers, which causes some lag in getting that information out. He said that Metro’s goal is to get customers information that they can use to make decisions about their trips.

Dr. Conn suggested that Metro partner with other communication agencies to be able to provide information about alternative transportation options. She also suggested that Metro set up a dedicated radio frequency or phone number which would allow it to provide information about delays or disruptions to people who don’t have internet access. She added that during emergencies or other disruptions, Metro should have customer service staff available to help disseminate information and answer questions. Mr. Stessel said that during emergencies, Metro will never be able to provide riders with information about their specific options. He said that Metro needs to do better to help riders figure out their options during service disruptions in advance, including options operated by entities other than Metro. Mr. Stessel added that people are able to receive eAlerts via text message, even if they don’t have smartphones.

Ms. Daniels asked about bus operators’ responsibility for ensuring that priority seating is made available for those that need them. She also asked whether the phones on buses are ever used to disseminate information about detours or disruptions to bus operators, as that would be one way to help get information to riders who don’t have internet access. Mr. Stessel said that he’s not sure about Metro’s use of onboard phones to disseminate information to bus drivers. He said that in his previous position, he used a program that would send alerts not only via email, but also via text message and would automatically generate a message on the agency’s main customer service phone line alerting callers to a disruption, and that having such a system is something Metro would like to develop. With regard to Ms. Daniels’ question about bus operator responsibilities to enforce priority seating rules, Mr. Stessel said that he would have to research that.

Mr. Kitchen said that he liked the changes to Metro's website design and asked how Metro monitors its Twitter feed with regard to all of the new handles that is developed. Mr. Stessel said that Metro monitors all of its feeds and searches out mentions of #MetroForward, #WMATA and #MetroOpensDoors. In response to another question from Mr. Kitchen, Mr. Stessel explained that Metro sends out its press releases as links back to its webpage rather than as standalone emails to ensure that, should any information change, users will always be directed back to a page that has the most up-to-date information.

Mr. DeBernardo said that he has been impressed with Metro's foray into social media, and noted that, as Metro's communication with its riders become more two-way, this will make Mr. Stessel's role into more of an ombudsman. He asked whether Mr. Stessel is prepared to take on this role. Mr. Stessel responded that Metro began the two-way conversations with its customers informally, and is working with its customer service staff to develop a process to track complaints that are registered via social media and ensure that those complaints are followed up on. He said that the communications department is in a unique position to act as a customer advocate to identify and address issues as they arise.

VI. Revised Approach to Weekend Trackwork:

Mr. DeBernardo then introduced Dave Kubicek, Metro's Deputy General Manager for Operations, who provided the Council with an overview of the new approach that Metro will be using for track rehabilitation projects. He explained that Metro would completely close sections of its rail lines to perform construction work, rather than single-tracking trains around work zones. He said that Metro would be soon releasing a one-year "look ahead" that would show planned outages for the coming twelve months.

Mr. Kubicek noted that this approach will allow for near-normal service on the unaffected portions of the rail line, whereas single-tracking affects operations on the entire length of the line. He explained that this will also allow Metro to complete its work more quickly, and provided the examples that Metro will be able to replace train control hardware and return to Automatic Train Operation approximately 20 months earlier by performing targeted shutdowns versus single-tracking around work zones and that it will be able to replace all of its switches to comply with National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) recommendations by 2012.

Mr. Kitchen said that he understood that Metro needs to do construction, but noted that many people still need to work on the holidays identified, so closing Metro stations is a major inconvenience. He also suggested that Metro send out more information to local governments to improve its notification procedures. Mr. Kubicek said that he would check with Metro's Government Relations staff to see how local governments are notified about projects. In response to Mr. Kitchen's comment about closing on holidays, Mr. Kubicek said that, while staff doesn't like working on holidays, it allows Metro to avoid shutting down the system during regular weekdays and the three-day weekends provide 84 hours of continuous work time for Metro to accomplish its work.

Mr. Alpert asked whether customers will continue to see weeknight single-tracking in addition to these planned weekend shutdowns. Mr. Kubicek explained that customers will see some reductions in single-tracking because Metro will be concentrating its resources on the weekend shutdowns. He also noted that

rail service on the other parts of the line – outside of the work zone – won't be affected like it is when trains are single-tracked.

Mr. Alpert noted that Metro will be replacing train control modules during these weekend closures and asked whether all of the appropriate parties have approved these new modules. Mr. Kubicek said that yes, these new modules are different than the ones that had been used previously. He added that Metro will check all aspects of the train control system and work with the NTSB and appropriate safety agencies to ensure the safety of the train control system.

Ms. Zinkl said that there was a lot of discontent in her Capitol Hill neighborhood concerning the recent Blue/Orange line closure over Memorial Day weekend. Mr. Kubicek responded that Metro's plans for the closure were communicated well in advance and that most of the participants at the major event, the Rolling Thunder rally at RFK Stadium, weren't riding Metro anyhow, as they were arriving via motorcycle. He said that while he understands that there are concerns about these shutdowns, they are required to make safety improvements and Metro will continue performing this work despite neighborhood concerns about specific shutdowns.

Dr. Conn asked whether this trackwork would address all of the NTSB recommendations. Mr. Kubicek said that this trackwork schedule addresses all of the NTSB's recommendations. He explained that the new railcars to replace the oldest cars in Metro's fleet and new train control modules are fully funded as part of Metro's capital program. He added that once all of the NTSB's recommendations have been address, the NTSB will review Metro's progress and may make additional recommendations.

Ms. Walker said that she agreed with the need to put safety first and could understand the need for Metro to undertake these weekend closures. She said that Metro needs to provide at least three months' notice to communities in advance of these closures. Mr. Kubicek replied that Metro would be soon issuing a schedule that will provide riders with a great deal of advance notice concerning these closures.

Mr. Clermont asked whether Metro has any contingency plans if the federal government decides not to continue to fund its share of Metro's capital program. Mr. Kubicek said that Metro is very concerned about the possibility of reduced funding. He said that if Metro has to reduce its capital program, it will prioritize making safety improvements, such as replacing railcars, installing safer switches and new train control modules, while other items, such as air conditioning repairs or escalator replacements may be delayed. He noted that because Metro has scheduled contractors to perform work, it will incur penalties from its contractors if funding is cut and projects have to be cancelled.

In response to a question from Dr. Bracmort, Mr. Kubicek noted that work on the Green and Yellow lines is being performed later because those lines were opened later than the Red and Blue/Orange lines.

Mr. DeBernardo suggested that the Council defer its discussion on the 7000 Series railcar mock-up review until the next meeting.

VII. Questions and Comments on RAC and AAC Chair Reports:

Ms. Walker asked Mr. Sheehan whether Metro's platform tiles are an issue of concern for the Accessibility Advisory Committee. Mr. Sheehan responded that platform tiles are a concern and have been discussed by the AAC's Bus/Rail Subcommittee, which deals with concerns about Metro's fixed-route transit. He said that he would like this Subcommittee to interface with the RAC to ensure that any recommendations from the RAC and the AAC are consistent.

VIII. Board Bylaws update:

Mr. DeBernardo provided an update for the Council on the Board of Directors' approval of its bylaws. Mr. Pasek noted that the comments shown on the draft bylaws were from various stakeholder groups, including the RAC, the Board of Trade, and the Governors' Working Group, among others. He noted that the Board would be giving its final consideration to the draft bylaws the following day.

Mr. Alpert then provided an overview of the RAC's specific comments and how those were or were not incorporated into the Board's draft bylaws. He noted that language was added to the draft bylaws exempting Metro from being required to provide the RAC with information that would not be required to be disclosed under its Public Access to Records Policy (PARP). Mr. Alpert also explained that there was not a formal process included in the draft Board procedures to address situations where requests for information from the Council were denied by staff, despite the Council's request that one be included.

Mr. Schmitt moved that the Council express its dissatisfaction to the Board's Governance Committee that under the proposed Board bylaws, Metro could use the provisions of its Public Access to Records Policy (PARP) to refuse certain requests for information by the Council. This motion was seconded by Mr. Kitchen.

Mr. Schmitt described the PARP as a "huge trap door" and said that because the PARP contains provisions citing the federal Freedom of Information Act, staff will be allowed to withhold significant information from the Council. He noted that by being subject to the PARP in its information requests, the Council would be restricting itself to only obtaining information that is available to the general public.

Ms. Zinkl suggested that the Council request the Board to clarify the specific items that would or wouldn't be provided to the Council should the bylaws be approved as proposed.

Mr. Alpert said that if the Council wants to ask the Board to change the proposed bylaws language, it needs to provide a better reason for the change, and needs to provide a specific example of information that wouldn't reasonably be provided under the PARP.

Ms. Walker said that she would be inclined not to object to the proposed bylaws language at the present time and, if the Council feels that its access to information is being restricted, it can address this concern with the Board at a later time. Mr. Sheehan said that he agreed with this approach.

Ms. Zinkl suggested that the Council should ask that only Section 6 of the PARP, which specifically outlines exemptions to the policy, be applied to the Council's requests for information.



After further discussion, Mr. Schmitt said that he was still concerned that the exemptions to information requests contained in Metro's PARP are not just those contained in Section 6, but that because the PARP incorporates federal FOIA law, there is a great deal of information that can be exempted. He said that he was reluctant to back away from his opposition to the PARP being used to set parameters on the Council's requests for information. He noted that the Board would be discussing the matter at its meeting the following day and that the Council needed to weigh in on that discussion.

Mr. Alpert offered an amendment to Mr. Schmitt's original motion that would express to the Board that the Council thinks that the PARP exemption to Council information requests as proposed is vague and that any exemptions should only be those enumerated in Section 6 of the PARP. Mr. Alpert also moved that the Council ask the Board to establish a process by which the Council can appeal a decision by staff to deny any requests for information.

The Council voted on Mr. Alpert's amendment:

*In favor:* Mr. DeBernardo, Mr. Alpert, Mr. Bresner, Mr. Clermont, Dr. Conn, Mr. DeGraff, Mr. Farrell, Mr. Kitchen, Mr. Sheehan, Ms. Titus, Ms. Zinkl

*Opposed:* Ms. Daniels, Mr. Schmitt, Ms. Walker

*Abstentions:* Ms. Wilder

This amendment was approved. The Council then voted on the main motion, as amended:

*In favor:* Mr. DeBernardo, Mr. Alpert, Mr. Bresner, Mr. Clermont, Dr. Conn, Mr. DeGraff, Mr. Farrell, Mr. Kitchen, Mr. Sheehan, Ms. Titus

*Opposed:* Ms. Daniels, Mr. Schmitt, Ms. Walker

*Abstentions:* Ms. Wilder, Ms. Zinkl

This motion was approved, as amended.

IX. Announcements:

Mr. DeBernardo announced Mr. DeGraff, a Council member representing the District of Columbia, had resigned his position effective at the end of this meeting. He thanked him for his service on the Council.

Ms. Zinkl noted that the Capitol Hill Restoration Society ~~produced~~ showed a video concerning streetcars in D.C. She said that the video is based on historic amateur footage of the old DC Street Car system from the late 1950s and early 1960s. The video belongs to Father Pope at Holy Comforter-Saint Cyprian Church at 1357 East Capitol Street, SE, Washington, DC, 202 546 1885.

X. Adjournment:

Without objection, Mr. DeBernardo adjourned the meeting at 8:57 p.m.