

Riders' Advisory Council

May 2, 2012

I. Call to Order:

Dr. Bracmort called the May 2012 meeting of the Riders' Advisory Council at 6:34 p.m. The following members were present:

Kelsi Bracmort, Chair, District of Columbia
Carl Seip, District of Columbia Vice Chair
Joseph Kitchen, Maryland Vice Chair, Prince George's County
Lorraine Silva, Virginia Vice Chair, Arlington County
Ben Ball, District of Columbia
Frank DeBernardo, Prince George's County
Chris Farrell, Montgomery County
Dharm Guruswamy, At-Large
Pat Sheehan, At-Large/Accessibility Advisory Committee Chair
Carol Carter Walker, District of Columbia
Candice Walsh, District of Columbia
Ron Whiting, Montgomery County
Victoria Wilder, Montgomery County
James Wright, Prince George's County

II. Public Comment Period:

Kurt Raschke said that the Riders' Advisory Council needs to take controversial positions on issues if it wants to have an impact. He compared Metro's current condition to the condition of the New York City subway in the 1970s and said that if the system continues to decline, people will stop riding and will enter into a vicious cycle of decline. He said that the only way to avoid this is for the Council to stand up and speak for itself. Mr. Raschke said that the situation will become worse if the Council doesn't take any action.

Chris Barnes said that he attended the Council's April meeting and was surprised at the lack of interaction the Council had with the members of the public in attendance at that meeting. He noted that at the Accessibility Advisory Council meeting that he attended, members of the public were allowed to introduce themselves and encouraged to interact with members. He said that the Riders' Advisory Council needs to work on how it reaches out to members of the public.

Approved July 11, 2012

Mr. Sheehan also noted that one of the things that the AAC allows is for members of the public in attendance at its meetings to submit written comments. He said that this allows for comments to be addressed without anyone monopolizing the agenda.

III. Approval of Agenda:

Mr. Kitchen moved approval of the agenda as presented. This motion was seconded by Mr. Ball. Without objection, the agenda was approved as presented.

IV. Approval of Past Meeting Minutes:

Mr. Guruswamy moved approval of the April 4, 2012 meeting minutes as presented. This motion was seconded by Mr. Farrell. Without objection, the April 4, 2012 meeting minutes were approved as presented, with Mr. Kitchen abstaining.

V. Bus Stop Enhancements:

Jim Hamre and Krys Ochia from Metro's Office of Bus Planning discussed Metro's bus stop enhancement program and provided an overview of Metro's Bus Customer Facilities Branch. They explained how the branch fit into Metro's Office of Bus Planning, which staff members were responsible for specific aspects of bus stop infrastructure, and the challenges that Metro faces in improving its bus stops.

Mr. Ochia also discussed the New Freedom Grant program. He explained that Metro has received a federal grant under the New Freedom program to improve bus stop access for customers with disabilities. He gave an overview of the criteria that Metro, working with riders and disability community representatives, is considering to select bus stops for grant-funded improvements.

Following Mr. Hamre's and Mr. Ochia's presentation, Dr. Bracmort opened up the floor for questions and comments. She also noted that Metro faces the challenge of working with landowners to make bus stop improvements, especially when the landowner is the federal government.

Mr. Kitchen said that Metro needs to help riders understand the process that Metro has to go through to address bus stop complains and should let riders know that their complaint was received, even if it will take a while to resolve. He also raised concerns about the lack of notice regarding a recent meeting on the New Freedom Grant. Mr. Hamre responded that staff will report back to the Council on the recommendations so that it can weigh in prior to their implementation. Mr. Sheehan added that there were members of the Accessibility Advisory Committee and from regional Centers for Independent Living at the meeting. He suggested that the Councils receive information on the criteria for bus stop improvements that were evaluated

and ranked and how these criteria were used to develop recommendations. Mr. Pasek said that he would let Council members know about the next meeting concerning the grant.

Mr. Ball noted that many of the problems don't stem from what Metro is doing – he noted that he has seen improvements to bus stops. He said that the problem is with non-WMATA facilities such as trash cans, treeboxes, and newspaper boxes that obstruct access at bus stops. He said that Metro needs to establish criteria regarding where these items should be placed at bus stops.

Mr. Hamre responded that Metro did, in fact, establish criteria for the design and placement of bus stops a couple of years ago. He noted that a lot of the issues are longstanding and, in some cases, predate Metro. He added that as streetscape improvement projects are implemented and new development occurs, there are opportunities to make improvements to bus stop facilities. He said that the recent reconstruction of H Street NE was a good example of Metro working with the local jurisdiction to ensure that transit improvements are included as part of streetscape work.

Mr. Ball also suggested that Metro use “crowdsourcing” to determine which bus stops were most in need of improvements. He also asked the status of NextBus signs being installed at bus stops. Mr. Hamre said that Metro has just issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) for a multi-year contract that would allow for up to 800 LED bus arrival signs at bus stops over the next four years. He explained that funding for these signs is expected to come from three sources:

- The District of Columbia government, which gave Metro \$250,000 to develop and install signs on shelters;
- A federal TIGER grant, which will fund 168 signs; and
- \$400,000 in Metro's FY2013 budget that will fund various bus improvements, such as hiring a project coordinator and installing signs.

Mr. Hamre noted that the signs will not only function to tell riders when the next bus is coming, but will also provide Metro with another way to get information out to riders.

Mr. Guruswamy suggested that it would be helpful to have hard-copy “spider” maps to distribute to riders at rail stations. He also noted that allowing for street parking in front of bus stops makes the stop inaccessible for riders with disabilities and suggested that Metro's plan to consolidate bus stops could help with this issue.

Ms. Wilder noted that she has seen the new Metrobus bus stop signs and has grown to like them.

Mr. Wright asked if Metro plans to post timetables at every bus stop. Mr. Hamre replied that it is Metro's goal to have a timetable at each stop with more than 25 riders/day. He added that Metro is in the process of installing approximately 5000 information cases at its 11,000 stops, or slightly less than half of its stops.

Mr. Farrell noted that providing maps, timetables and fare information at bus stops is critical. He noted that Ride On used to produce maps of its bus routes, but doesn't do so as much anymore. Mr. Hamre explained that Metro will be re-issuing its Maryland bus map and splitting it into two parts to make it easier to read.

Mr. Farrell also noted that after dark, Ride On allows bus drivers to stop and let off passengers anywhere along the route, not just at bus stops. He asked whether Metro had a similar policy. Mr. Hamre said that Metro policy is that bus drivers are supposed to stop and board/let off passengers only at designated bus stops, not at any other places along their routes.

Ms. Silva said that she wanted to confirm that Metro makes decisions on whether to install a shelter or to remove a stop based on ridership numbers. Mr. Hamre confirmed this, and explained that originally a stop needed to have 50 or more riders/day to qualify to receive a shelter. He noted, however, that in the District of Columbia, additional shelters actually produce revenue for the city because the city gets money from shelter advertising. Regarding bus stop consolidation, Mr. Hamre noted that Metro has revised its outreach process for this process to include more outreach to the public in advance of discontinuing stops.

Ms. Silva also expressed her concerns about stops without any amenities except for a bus stop pole – she said that she thinks that these are dangerous. Mr. Hamre noted that Metro is trying to raise bus stops’ profile to enable Metro to make improvements – by raising the issue with the Board, using TIGER grant money to fund improvements, etc. He said that Metro staff is reinforcing the notion that bus stops are an important public investment.

Mr. Seip said that there needs to be a social media component to reporting bus stop complaints. Mr. Hamre suggested that customers contact Metro’s customer service line so that the complaint can be tracked and routed to the appropriate staff.

Mr. Seip also asked how Metro’s Adopt-a-Stop program is tied to bus stop improvements. Mr. Hamre explained that, especially in the District of Columbia, ClearChannel (the shelter contractor) is contractually obligated to clean every shelter every day, and that’s also the case for contractors in Montgomery, Prince George’s and Fairfax Counties. He added that Arlington County and the City of Alexandria use their own crews to maintain bus stops, and in some cases, the bus stops are maintained by adjacent homeowners’ associations. Mr. Hamre said that this means that the busiest stops, which are most popular for “adoption,” are already being taken care of. Mr. Seip said that Metro should continue to encourage adoption of bus stops, since it is in the best interest of businesses to have clean, well-maintained stops.

Dr. Bracmort noted that issues surrounding bus stop maintenance and improvements aren’t all related to Metro, depending on who owns the land where the bus stop is located.

Mr. Hamre said that he would be happy to work with a smaller group of Council members to review bus stop projects that Metro is working on and to provide more detailed information.

Ms. Walsh, a new member from the District of Columbia introduced herself and talked about how she uses Metro. She said that she appreciated that the Council was discussing bus stops because she is a frequent Metrobus user and has noticed issues with some Metrobus stops during her travels.

VI. Meeting with General Manager:

Dr. Bracmort gave the Council members an overview with her and the Council leadership team's meeting with Richard Sarles, Metro's General Manager. She said that in addition to Mr. Sarles, Barbara Richardson, the Assistant General Manager for Customer Service, Communications and Marketing and Carol Kissal, the Chief Financial Officer attended the meeting. She added that she thought that the meeting was productive and that she wanted to convey the following three points to the General Manager on behalf of the Council:

1. The Council wants to work with Metro staff to address issues raised by the Board and riders in a timely manner;
2. The Council wants to ensure that its feedback is solicited and incorporated in a timely manner; and
3. The Council would like acknowledgement by Metro staff of the recommendations that it submits.

Dr. Bracmort explained that she gave the General Manager an overview of the projects that the Council was currently working on.

In addition, the General Manager had provided the Council some topics on which he would like its feedback, specifically:

1. How to best influence customer behavior;
2. How to increase the feedback and public input that Metro gets from its low-income and limited-English proficient riders;
3. How to encourage riders to enter/exit buses more quickly; and
4. Strategies to use to lower the cost of SmarTrip cards.

Dr. Bracmort said that she would be interested in getting members' feedback about the Council working on these items and whether they would like to move forward with these items.

Mr. Guruswamy said that he would like to work on how to get people into and out of the system more quickly.

Mr. DeBernardo said that he didn't think that influencing customer behavior as noted in the first and third was within the Council's scope and that the Council isn't responsible for policing the Metro system. Mr. Guruswamy said that the Council should be providing involved in providing input on issues that affect the riders' experiences.

Mr. Ball said that he would be interested in exploring the issue of reducing the price of SmarTrip cards and that the Council could provide a great deal of input to provide on the issue of how to speed bus entry/exit.

Mr. Whiting said that he would be interested in working on the issue of helping riders enter and exit the system more quickly, and notes that this relates to system safety. Mr. Pasek noted that the General Manager's suggestion focused on how to move customers onto and off of buses more quickly, not the rail system.

Mr. Seip said that he was leery of the Council being involved in dictating customer behavior and added that the Authority isn't using the tools it already has available, such as police enforcement, to address customer behavior issues. Dr. Bracmort said that when the General Manager suggested that the Council look into customer behavior, he asked that they look at other transit systems' efforts and creative solutions.

Ms. Walker said that she thinks that it is within the Council's role to look at outreach to limited-English proficient riders and how that can be improved and added that she thinks that any efforts to change customer behavior should be couched in terms of improving the overall rider experience. Mr. Kitchen added that he didn't think that the Council should be addressing customer behavior, especially when there are so many examples of unprofessional behavior by Metro employees.

Mr. Kitchen also noted that the issues surrounding communicating with low-income and limited-English proficient riders is largely a function of a lack of access to technology.

Mr. Pasek clarified the General Manager's requests for feedback on customer behavior and the cost of a SmarTrip cards.

Mr. Sheehan said that the Council should talk to the Council of Governments' "Access for All" committee regarding rider outreach to low-income and limited-English riders and also review the Accessibility Advisory Committee's proposals regarding the cost penalty that Metro imposes and plans to increase for customers paying with cash or paper farecards. He said that he thinks that the Council should look at these recommendations to ensure that it doesn't duplicate efforts.

Ms. Walsh said that customer etiquette is a huge issue for customers and has the ability to greatly impact riders' experiences on transit and that riders need to be made better aware of the rules and expectations for behavior. She added that getting into and out of the bus is also difficult and deserves to be looked at. She said that there needs to be better information provided on how to use Metro, especially for those that don't have access to computers.

Ms. Wilder said that she like the idea of reducing the cost of SmarTrip cards and said that she would like for Metro to do more outreach and advertising about the availability of SmarTrip cards. In response to Mr. Kitchen's comments about low-income and limited-English riders' lack of access to technology, Metro may want to look at opportunities for in-person meetings or to provide information about its services at community centers.

Mr. DeBernardo said that the Council needs to assume good intentions on the part of Metro staff in terms of the issues on which it is asking the Council to provide recommendations. He said that his concern about the items on which Metro wants the Councils feedback is that when he speaks with riders about their issues with Metro, customer behavior and boarding/exiting buses don't come up as concerns. He added that, in terms of prioritizing the Council's activities, getting information from all riders and getting more riders onto SmarTrip are higher priorities.

Mr. Kitchen noted that a lot of the Council's work is done outside of its monthly meeting, so members who are interested in particular topics will have the opportunity to work on those issues.

VII. Working Group Updates:

Mr. Kitchen provided a brief update on his efforts regarding youth outreach. He said that he had reached out to student organizations in the District of Columbia and Montgomery and Prince George's County, Maryland. He said that he would appreciate any suggestions on who best to reach out to in Virginia. He also noted that Metro staff would be coming to discuss the topic with the Council.

Mr. Ball gave a brief overview of the meeting of the Airport Accessibility Working Group. He said that Metro staff explained the background and issues with Metro's current airport bus service and that the meeting was very informative. He said that staff is working on setting up a meeting with Airports Authority staff in the near future. Mr. Ball encouraged and members who were interested to participate.

VIII. Communications Recommendations:

Mr. Seip said that members of the Council have weighed in on how Metro can communicate better, on a regular basis, with its riders, and that the group has compiled recommendations for ways that Metro can do that.

Mr. Seip then moved approval of the recommendations outlined in the letter that members were provided as part of their meeting materials. This motion was seconded by Mr. Kitchen.

Dr. Bracmort suggested that the letter include examples of how other transit agencies communicate with their riders to let Metro know that these suggestions have been implemented elsewhere.

Mr. Kitchen noted that there may be some staff concerns about the feasibility of some of the suggestions provided. He said that Board members noted during the discussion at last week's Board meeting, that what they needed from Metro staff in response to proposals was not to hear that certain items weren't feasible, but rather the costs involved with undertaking recommendations, which would allow the Board to decide whether or not something was worth doing.

Mr. DeBernardo noted that during his tenure on the Council, the group has talked repeatedly about improving communication with riders, but that this was the first concrete proposal put forward.

Mr. Seip said that he would agree to include an appendix of other transit systems' communications efforts as part of this letter.

Without objection, the motion was approved.

Mr. DeBernardo suggested that the letter should include information on the benefits to Metro of adopting the suggestions that the Council put forward.

IX. Meeting on Emergency Communications and Response:

Mr. Seip noted that there have been recent, high-profile incidents in the past month that have raised concerns about Metro's response to emergencies. He said that the leadership team proposed that the Council hold a hearing within the next month to discuss these issues and to focus on how to ensure that these incidents won't happen again in the future.

Dr. Bracmort said that she had initially had some reservations about this meeting and that she wants to ensure that this meeting isn't a finger-pointing session, but rather a fact-finding meeting that will, at its conclusion, will give stakeholders, including riders, the transit police and other first responders, a clearer idea of how to address issues going forward. She also asked members whether or not they thought it would be helpful to partner with the Metro Board or one of its committees in holding this meeting. She said that it might add more weight to this meeting.

Mr. Seip added that there would also be a public component to the meeting in terms of taking comments from members of the public.

Mr. Ball said that when talking about these types of issues, people tend to get very emotional and suggested that the Council try and focus on data and to look at the metrics Metro uses to determine success.

Mr. Kitchen said that he liked the idea of including Board members, as that could help in information gathering, but that he also had reservations, because Board members may have different points of view than riders. He asked Mr. Seip whether the Council would gather background information before the meeting. Mr. Seip responded that it would.

Dr. Bracmort said that while the Council wants to move quickly on this issue, it isn't a topic that should be rushed. She also noted that the Council had been contacted by a passenger involved in the defibrillator incident, and that it would be useful to have him talk with the Council regardless of how its moves forward on this issue.

Ms. Wilder agreed that it would be helpful to get more background information prior to the meeting and noted that the Transit Police must have procedures that it follows and that it would be helpful to review these procedures.

Mr. Seip moved to hold such a meeting within the next month. This motion was seconded by Mr. Ball.

Mr. DeBernardo asked for clarification of the motion – whether it was to begin planning or to have the actual meeting within the next month. Mr. Seip said that he hoped to have the meeting within the next month. Ms. Wilder noted that because there are so many parties to coordinate, having a meeting within the next month may not be realistic.

Dr. Bracmort said that while it may not be possible to hold the meeting within the next month, the meaning of the vote is to agree that the Council wants to have such a meeting.

Mr. DeBernardo said that if the group wants to have the public attend such a meeting, they need more notice.

Ms. Walsh asked about the purpose of the meeting – whether it was a fact-finding meeting or to develop recommendations on how to make improvements. Mr. Seip said that he viewed it as having both purposes and he sees value in getting multiple players together to discuss the issue.

Ms. Wilder suggested that this could be an opportunity to have a meeting at a location other than the Metro building.

Without objection, this motion was approved without objection.

X. Questions/Comments on RAC and AAC Chair Reports:

Mr. Sheehan said that the Board approved increases in bus and rail fares and did not act on testimony provided at the most recent Board meeting to not increase MetroAccess fares – that they would increase with bus and rail fares. He said that the AAC would have to wait and see what the change is to MetroAccess fares.

After further discussion, Mr. Pasek noted that the Board hadn't approved a final FY2013 budget, so there are still opportunities for changes to the budget.

Mr. Kitchen said that he delivered the report to the Board in April and updated the Board on its discussions at the prior Council meeting. He said, based on the number of MetroAccess users who testified at the Board meeting, that he hoped that the Riders' Advisory Council would be vigilant in looking out for their interests as well, since they have to pay a lot of substandard service.

XI. Open Mic/Community Meetings:

Dr. Bracmort noted that she attended the recent meeting on Deanwood station access. She also asked members to help publicize the monthly Council meetings.

Mr. Farrell announced upcoming meetings of the Action Committee for Transit.

Without objection, Dr. Bracmort adjourned the meeting at 8:45 p.m.