

Metro Riders' Advisory Council

March 5, 2014

I. Call to Order:

Ms. Walker called the March 2014 meeting of the Metro Riders' Advisory Council to order at 6:31 p.m.

The following members were present:

Carol Carter Walker, Chair, At-Large
Barbara Hermanson, Virginia Vice Chair, City of Alexandria
Karen Lynch, Maryland Vice Chair, Prince George's County
Candice Walsh, District of Columbia Vice Chair
Ben Ball, District of Columbia
Frank DeBernardo, Prince George's County
Thomas Draths, At-Large
Katherine Kortum, Montgomery County
Aldea Meary-Miller, Arlington County
Jose Morales, District of Columbia
Robert Pappas, Fairfax County
Patrick Sheehan, At-Large/Accessibility Advisory Committee Chair
Lorraine Silva, Arlington County
Deborah Titus, Fairfax County
Dan Turk, District of Columbia
Fred Walker, Fairfax County
Dexter Williams, District of Columbia
Mary Ann Zimmerman, Montgomery County

The following members were not present for any portion of the meeting:

Etta-Cheri Washington, District of Columbia
James Wright, Prince George's County

The following individuals were also present:

Tom Downs, Chair, Metro Board of Directors

Barbara Milleville, President, National Capital Citizens with Low Vision, Washington Metropolitan Area (DC)

John Pasek, Assistant Board Secretary/Acting RAC Staff Coordinator, Metro

Kurt Raschke, Member of the public

Loyda Sequeira, Board Secretary, Metro

II. Public Comment:

Ms. Walker opened the floor for comments from members of the public.

Mr. Raschke said that he wanted to comment on the Council's proposed recommendations concerning Metro fares, specifically its support for eliminating the cash surcharge on bus fares. He noted that there is a significant cost to Metro to handle cash and suggested that the Council look at how other agencies handle cash payments. He added that Transport for London will stop accepting cash for payment aboard buses this summer. Mr. Raschke said that he realized that there are significant equity issues involved in electronic fare collection and for a transit agency to "go cashless," but that the Council would do better to suggest ways to tackle this issue head-on, rather than to suggest eliminating the surcharge. He said that the RAC should instead focus on suggesting ways to make it easier for unbanked/underbanked individuals to pay their fares.

Barbara Milleville, the president of National Capital Citizens with Low Vision, Washington Metropolitan Area (DC) explained to the Council that she and her organization have been working with the Accessibility Advisory Committee and its Bus/Rail Subcommittee to improve the lighting in Metrorail stations. She said that she has been getting positive feedback on this project and wanted to ask for the RAC's support going forward.

III. Approval of Agenda:

Ms. Walker asked for comments or suggested changes to the agenda presented. Without objection, the agenda was approved as presented.

IV. Approval of Past Meeting Minutes:

Mr. Ball moved to approve the December 5, 2013 and February 12, 2014 minutes as presented. This motion was seconded by Mr. Walker. Without objection, these two sets of minutes were approved as presented.

V. Orientation – Part A – Discussion with Metro Board Chair:

Ms. Walker then introduced Tom Downs, Chair of the Metro Board of Directors.

Mr. Downs explained to the Council that he serves as one of two voting members from the District of Columbia on the Metro Board, and is appointed by the mayor. He provided an overview of the various positions that he has held during his career, including:

- Chair of the Eno Transportation Institute;
- Professor at the University of Maryland;
- Chairman and CEO of Amtrak;
- District of Columbia City Administrator; and
- Director of the District Department of Transportation.

Mr. Downs noted that he was previously on the Metro Board, and there were several things at Metro that have remained unchanged since then, though several things have, including the presence of the Riders' Advisory Council and the Accessibility Advisory Committee as structured groups representing riders. He added that everyone on the Board appreciates the work that the RAC and the AAC do and noted that it can be a challenge to find a balance between what advocacy groups want to see happen and professional staff's recommendations. He then asked Council members to introduce themselves.

After member introductions, Mr. Downs told the Council that two recommendations from the AAC and the RAC have impressed him the most during his time on the Board:

1. The RAC's report on airport bus service. He said that it was clear that the Council put a lot of thoughtful effort into the report, and if the group puts that kind of effort into its recommendations, it can expect to make a lot of headway. He noted that the report contained clear research and coherent recommendations for what the Council wanted to see changed.
2. The AAC's report on Metrorail station lighting. He noted that 65% of customer injuries in the rail system are due to slips and falls, and that poor lighting may contribute to those injuries. He said that the report was helpful because it focused on a specific problem and provided detailed recommendations.

Mr. Downs said that there were a couple of topics on which he would be interested in getting the Council's input and recommendations:

- The right balance of fare increases between rail and bus. He said that many bus riders are dependent on transit because they don't own cars, which needs to be factored in to any recommendation.
- More people are riding transit as a matter of choice, rather than as a matter of necessity; how can Metro meet this expanded demand. He added that this may need to involve

tackling issues such as why it is so hard to get signal priority or dedicated lanes for transit in the region.

Mr. Downs also noted that vehicle miles travelled (VMT) in the region has decreased over the past seven years despite increases in population.

He also added that it isn't the Board's business to direct the Council as to what topics it should tackle; he said that it is the Council's job to make that decision, to do the work and to bring concrete recommendations for changes to the Board.

Ms. Walker then opened the floor to questions and comments from Council members.

Comments from Council members:

Mr. Ball said that one of the topics that Mr. Downs didn't touch on during his talk was Metro's strategic direction and its strategic plan, Momentum, and how it would plan for the next ten years.

Mr. Downs responded that one of Metro's challenges is that it is a hybrid between a subway system and commuter rail. He explained that commuter rail systems function largely at peak hours along corridors with heavy rush-hour demand, but then park most of their trains in-between those periods. He noted that Metro, however, runs trains all day long, at fairly frequent intervals, to far-off locations such as Shady Grove and will, at some point, run trains out to the middle of Loudoun County. He said that the challenge is that the system works well until it gets close to the core, but then it breaks down.

Mr. Downs said that Metro needs to have all eight-car trains in order to address this issue. He added that Metro functions as a network, not as a collection of individual lines, and that, as a network, it is as vulnerable as its weakest point. He said that people don't fully understand how close Metro is to its breaking point.

Mr. Turk asked Mr. Downs if he could discuss something that at Metro that has improved during over the course of his time with the organization. Mr. Downs said that the distance that buses travel between breakdowns is up significantly – it was around 400 miles in the early 1980s and is now over 8,000. He added that it was hard to imagine how bad bus service was and how badly the rail system had been treated, maintenance-wise. He noted that the rebuilding process will take about three more years. Mr. Downs added that the Metro organization has gotten better and, as an example, referred to the amount of transit information that riders are able to access on their smartphones. He said that the Council can be helpful by thinking of creative ways for Metro to take next steps in terms of technological innovations.

Ms. Walsh noted that the Council's leadership team had a discussion at its recent meeting and much of that discussion focused on what the RAC's role is supposed to be. She noted that, under the bylaws, some of the Council's role is to foster community involvement, and asked Mr. Downs if he had any suggestions about how it should go about doing that. Mr. Downs mentioned the Accessibility Advisory Committee's recent recommendations about the accessibility challenges faced by those attending Metro public hearings as an example and also noted that the Federal Transit Administration has guidelines on public participation. He said that there are industry "best practices" in terms of public participation and said that the RAC should ask for a briefing on what Metro staff is trying out regarding enhanced communication with riders. He suggested looking at Metro's processes for public engagement as a step in making recommendations.

Ms. Lynch noted that Mr. Downs had spoken in great detail about demand surpassing capacity, and asked what Metro is doing about telework and other changes that affect how people use the system. Mr. Downs said that it is inevitable that telework will have a significant impact on how people move around and commute, though its most significant impact will be on automobile travel. He added that there will be some impact on rail ridership and likely not as much of an impact on bus ridership. He said that this ridership loss from telework will be offset by new "choice" riders who are moving to the region and have different expectations about mobility. He noted that rail ridership has softened and that telework will have an impact on rail commute ridership, especially if Congress doesn't restore transit benefits to their previous level.

Mr. Sheehan thanked Mr. Downs for the Board's support on disability issues. He noted that joint initiatives from both the Riders' Advisory Council and the Accessibility Advisory Committee would be most powerful, in terms of their impact and asked Mr. Downs if he could comment on the kind of projects that the RAC and AAC might work on together. Mr. Downs suggested that the issues of inaccessible bus stops and transit advocacy would be areas where the two groups could work together.

VI. Report from Budget Committee:

Ms. Walker said that she would then turn the floor over to Mr. Walker for the report from the Budget Committee, but said she wanted to first address two issues:

- She said that during this discussion, the Council could try and address the issues that Mr. Raschke raised during public comment; and
- She asked Mr. Sheehan to provide the Council with an overview of the AAC's position on proposed fares and the FY2015 budget.

Mr. Walker then reviewed the Budget Committee's recommendations regarding fares. He noted that there were some limitations in the scope of the committee's work, specifically that it wanted to keep the recommendations focused on what was advertised for the public hearings and that it wanted its recommendations to raise enough money to close Metro's projected budget gap.

He said that the highlights of the recommendations were:

For Metrorail:

- A 4% increase in the peak fare;
- No increase in the off-peak fare.
- Approval of the creation of a "convention pass;" and
- No increase in the price of a 28-day pass.

For Metrobus:

- Raising the fare to either \$1.70 or \$1.75.

For Parking:

- Increasing the base parking charge by 25¢;
- Not implementing the proposed 50¢ increase in the Prince George's County parking surcharge.

Mr. Ball moved for the Council to adopt the proposal put forward by the Budget Committee, as presented.

Mr. Sheehan noted that the issue of MetroAccess fares has not yet been discussed. Mr. Walker noted that the issue of MetroAccess is fairly complicated and that the Budget Committee was interested in hearing the AAC's recommendations. Ms. Walker said that she would like to split the discussion by first talking about bus and rail fares and then have Mr. Sheehan discuss the AAC's recommendations. Mr. Ball noted that the AAC's recommendations didn't note how they would be funded.

Ms. Silva seconded Mr. Ball's motion to adopt the Budget Committee's recommendations on bus and rail fares and parking fees, as presented.

Ms. Titus asked if there were revenue projections for the proposed convention pass. Mr. Ball explained that this pass does not yet exist, so there isn't any data to compare it to. Mr. Walker noted that the committee thought it was a good idea and should be put forward.

Mr. Pappas had questions about the amount of money that the proposed fare increases would raise.

Mr. Turk said that he believes that eliminating the surcharge for paying cash on bus is a step backwards and that the real issue is giving people the option to load their cards off of the bus. He said that there are a lot of benefits to keeping the surcharge. He added that he also didn't understand why the Committee felt the need to match the \$30 million in fare increases proposed by Metro with its recommendations.

Ms. Kortum asked about the difference between the proposed convention pass and the existing weekly pass products. Mr. Ball explained that the convention pass would be marketed solely to visitors and that it would have a limited duration. Mr. Pasek noted that the convention pass could be purchased for a variable number of days at a cost of \$10/day.

Ms. Kortum also asked whether there has ever been any discussion about making bus riders who are paying with cash board the bus last so that they won't delay the people behind them. Council members said that this has not been proposed and would be difficult to enforce.

Mr. Ball noted that the RAC heard a presentation last year regarding cash payments on the bus which explained that cash-paying customers are the most price-sensitive – they can't afford to "loan" Metro money by loading it on their SmarTrip® cards in advance. He noted that eliminating the cash surcharge would decrease the burden on Metro's most price-sensitive riders.

Mr. Ball also noted that much of the increase in Metro's budget is mandated because of its labor contracts.

Ms. Walker then opened the floor to comments from members of the public.

Comments from members of the public:

Mr. Raschke said that making cash-paying riders board the bus last would upset people, especially since it's not agency policy. He added that, regarding price-sensitive riders, there aren't social services programs to help those individuals afford transit. He said that this is more a of social service concern rather than a concern for running a transit service.

Ms. Walker then turned the floor back to comments from Council members.

Mr. Morales said that the Chair had noted that bus riders are often in lower socioeconomic brackets and asked whether the committee was aware of this previously. He said that he also wanted to know how the recommendation to increase peak rail fares but not off-peak rail fares will affect riders' behavior. Mr. Walker said that supply-and-demand does not necessarily apply to Metro ridership, explaining that large numbers of riders who commute have their fares subsidized, whereas off-peak riders are more likely to be price-sensitive. Mr. Ball noted Metro's experience charging extra during the "peak-of-the-peak" which didn't shift ridership.

Ms. Walsh said that she would be interested in knowing about the data regarding riders who pay the cash fare on buses. Mr. Ball said that this information was collected the previous year.

The Council had further discussion on whether or not to charge different prices for bus riders paying with cash or SmarTrip®. Ms. Lynch noted that Metro's New Electronic Payments Program (NEPP) will offer additional payment options in the near future.

Ms. Walker noted that Metro's equity analysis of the proposed fare increase may have an impact on what the Board ultimately approves. Mr. Pasek explained the equity analysis and how it would work for the various fare options being considered. Ms. Walker added that Metro also looks for administrative savings when constructing its budget and that Metro is losing money for each month that the Silver Line isn't open.

Mr. Ball moved to close debate on this motion. Ms. Lynch seconded the motion to close debate.

In favor: Mr. Ball, Ms. Kortum, Ms. Lynch, Mr. Sheehan

Opposed: Mr. DeBernardo, Mr. Draths, Ms. Meary-Miller, Mr. Morales, Mr. Pappas, Ms. Silva, Ms. Titus, Mr. Turk, Ms. Walker, Mr. Walker, Mr. Williams, Ms. Zimmerman.

The motion to close debate failed.

Ms. Titus asked whether the budget committee thought about making recommendations on the \$1 paper farecard charge. Mr. Walker replied that since it wasn't on the docket, the committee didn't consider it.

Ms. Meary-Miller told the Council that she thought the bus fare should be set at \$1.75. She explained that she had looked at other companies' practices and noted that Chipotle rounds prices up or down to the nearest quarter to speed up transactions.

Mr. Turk moved to amend the motion on the floor to recommend retaining the 20¢ surcharge for paying cash on the bus (\$1.70 SmarTrip®/\$1.90 cash). Mr. Ball seconded Mr. Turk's amendment.

The Council then voted on Mr. Turk's amendment.

In favor: Mr. Ball, Mr. Draths, Mr. Pappas, Mr. Turk, Ms. Walsh

Opposed: Mr. DeBernardo, Ms. Hermanson, Ms. Kortum, Ms. Meary-Miller, Mr. Morales, Ms. Lynch, Mr. Sheehan, Ms. Silva, Ms. Titus, Ms. Walker, Mr. Walker, Mr. Williams, Ms. Zimmerman.

This motion failed.

Ms. Hermanson noted that she voted against Mr. Turk's amendment not because she was opposed to the principle of riders using cash paying more than SmarTrip® users, but because \$1.90 is not a round number.

Mr. Turk then proposed an amendment to the budget committee's recommendation to set the cash bus fare at \$1.75 (with the SmarTrip® fare at \$1.70). This amendment was seconded by Ms. Kortum.

In favor: Mr. Draths, Ms. Hermanson, Ms. Silva, Mr. Turk

Opposed: Mr. Ball, Mr. DeBernardo, Ms. Kortum, Ms. Lynch, Ms. Meary-Miller, Mr. Morales, Mr. Pappas, Mr. Sheehan, Ms. Titus, Ms. Walker, Mr. Walker, Ms. Walsh, Mr. Williams, Ms. Zimmerman.

This motion failed.

Mr. Pappas then proposed to amend the budget committee's recommendation to retain the cash surcharge by keeping the cash fare at \$1.80 (with the SmarTrip® fare raised to \$1.70), with a study of the cost of handling cash. This motion was seconded by Mr. Turk.

Mr. Walker noted that this proposal would reduce revenue from the initial proposal.

In favor: Mr. DeBernardo, Mr. Draths, Ms. Hermanson, Ms. Kortum, Ms. Meary-Miller, Mr. Pappas, Ms. Silva, Ms. Titus, Mr. Turk, Ms. Walker, Ms. Walsh

Opposed: Mr. Ball, Ms. Lynch, Mr. Morales, Mr. Walker, Mr. Williams, Ms. Zimmerman

Abstaining: Mr. Sheehan

This motion was approved.

Ms. Walker then asked Mr. Sheehan to discuss the Accessibility Advisory Committee's recommendations on MetroAccess. Mr. Sheehan explained that because of the way that MetroAccess fares are calculated, whatever increases are approved for Metrobus and Metrorail are doubled for MetroAccess users.

He said that the AAC had put forward three recommendations to the Board regarding changes to MetroAccess fares:

1. Calculate the MetroAccess fare as twice the Metrobus fare;
2. Reduce the multiplier – rather than 2x the cost of a comparable bus/rail trip, the AAC recommended lowering the multiplier to 1.25x or 1.5x; or
3. Lowering the current cap on the cost of a trip from \$7 to \$6.50.

He said that the AAC has received information from Metro's finance staff that these suggestions are feasible.

Ms. Walsh asked Mr. Sheehan whether the AAC would be willing to change its position on the cash surcharge now that the RAC has modified its recommendation. Ms. Walker pointed out that the AAC has already approved its position on the budget and fares, and so wouldn't be in a position to go back and change that. She suggested that the RAC vote to endorse the AAC's position on items that are not in conflict with its own recommendations, and not endorse the recommendation about removing the cash surcharge.

Mr. Walker moved that the RAC endorse the portions of AAC's proposal that do not conflict with its own recommendations as part of its budget recommendations. This motion was seconded by Mr. Ball.

Without objection, the motion to endorse the AAC's recommendations regarding the MetroAccess fare cap and a reduction in the multiplier was approved.

Ms. Walker then called for a vote on the main motion. Without objection, the motion was approved as amended.

Ms. Walker said that she would work with the leadership team to have a letter to the Board by March 10th with the RAC's recommendations on fares, so that the Board could review it before its March 13th Finance Committee meeting.

Ms. Walker also asked, as a follow-up to Mr. Downs' comments, that Mr. Pasek circulate the RAC's report on airport bus service and the AAC's report on station lighting.

Ms. Walker noted that the Council had not gotten to the workplan portion of the agenda and asked members whether they would be amenable to a special meeting later in the month to discuss this item. Mr. Pasek said that he would poll members regarding their availability.

Without objection, the meeting was adjourned at 8:44 p.m.