

Statement of
David Alpert, Vice-Chair
Riders' Advisory Council
Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority
Before the
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
United States House of Representatives

April 21, 2010

Chairman Towns and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for inviting me to testify today. My name is David Alpert and I am the District of Columbia Vice-Chair of the WMATA Riders' Advisory Council. I also report on and advocate for transit and better urban design through my Web site, Greater Greater Washington dot org.

The Riders' Advisory Council was established by WMATA in September 2005 and serves as the riders' voice within WMATA. The Council provides feedback to the Board and customer input to Metro staff. Council members are appointed by the Board of Directors. The Council consists of 21 members, two from each of the District of Columbia, Maryland and Virginia, two appointed at-large and the Chair of the Accessibility Advisory Committee. Members use Metro's transit services – Metrobus, Metrorail and MetroAccess – and represent a diverse mix of ages, backgrounds and ways in which they use Metro.

WMATA experienced its worst year in history in 2009, and suffered a substantial loss of public confidence. The June 2009 crash on the Red Line and subsequent track worker fatalities catalyzed that change, and accelerated awareness of the larger problem, the growing disrepair of the Metrorail infrastructure.

Despite the challenges faced by WMATA, it remains a vital asset to the Washington region. A recent Washington Post poll found that 80% of riders rate the system positively. During this past month, Metrorail recorded three of its top five highest ridership days (April 1st, 2nd and 7th). This underscores the region's dependence on Metro and also highlights the need to redouble efforts to maintain and expand the system.

WMATA, its new Interim General Manager Mr. Sarles, and its future permanent General Manager as well as all employees must ensure that safety is their top priority. We need the best safety managers and a culture from the top that ensures that all employees respect and follow the safety recommendations. One day, hopefully very soon, the immediate safety crisis will be a memory.

At that time, we will wrestle with the much more difficult task of repairing a system that is chronically underfunded, both from federal transportation spending rules which contain built-in biases against transit funding, to state and local fiscal decisions which fail to adequately fund a system that has brought hundreds of billions of dollars in economic value to the region.

Failing to keep the system in a state of good repair also seriously threatens safety. While certainly not as dramatic as the incidents that have occurred over the past year, crowded platforms following service disruptions, crumbling platform tiles and out-of-service elevators and escalators are significant, recurring safety concerns.

Ensuring stable and sufficient capital funding for Metro is necessary to improve safety.

As WMATA prepares to enter into its next capital plan on July 1st of this year, governments must also provide the resources necessary to adequately maintain Metro's safety and service, from specific safety recommendations from the National Transportation Safety Board to the everyday yet critical maintenance challenges.

Renewing the local Metro Matters funding agreement, which is currently under negotiation, is essential. Recent news reports have revealed that Maryland, in particular, has deferred some 2010 capital payments, may defer additional payments in 2011, and may not be able to renew its multi-year commitment to capital funding. In the Washington Post poll, 62% of respondents said that the region should "provide more public transportation options, such as trains or buses" rather than "expanding or building roads."

The Council appreciates Congress's support for the \$150 million annual federal capital funding for WMATA last year and hopes Congress will continue to provide these funds. Unfortunately, even continuing that appropriation annually and renewing the Metro Matters agreement leaves WMATA about \$3.4 billion short of its identified capital needs over the next 10 years.

In addition, WMATA must secure support for its Operating Budget. Closing the currently-projected \$190 million operating budget gap for FY2011 will likely require both significant fare increases and substantial service cuts. Proposed cuts could create long headways of up to 30 minutes on rail and an hour or more on some buses, increasing crowding and driving many choice riders away from transit. Others would eliminate some service entirely early in the morning and late at night, stranding riders who depend on Metro to get to work at those hours. The General Manager's proposed budget even shortened rush hour trains and eliminated Yellow Line service at many times.

During recent public hearings on WMATA's proposed operating budget and imminent fare increases and service reductions, riders expressed a clear preference for increased fares over reductions in service. However, fares cannot be raised too greatly lest riders, especially the most vulnerable, be priced off of Metro.

Riders are not the only ones who benefit from good transit. The entire region benefits economically. The federal government benefits from greater productivity. And drivers benefit from reduced congestion on roadways. For that reason, the Riders' Advisory Council and transit advocacy groups have asked local jurisdictions to increase their contributions enough to forestall severe service cuts.

The Northern Virginia counties have taken the greatest steps in this area, explicitly making room in their budgets for greater support for transit. Elected leaders including some DC Councilmembers and many Maryland state delegates and county councilmembers have expressed their support. However, there remains a great deal of uncertainty about the amount the funding jurisdictions can or will ultimately provide.

Over the long term, federal, state and local governments must recognize the tremendous asset that Metro represents to the region and support it accordingly. A majority of residents in the aforementioned poll said that the region should find new ways to fund Metro, even if that meant raising some taxes.

Metro's budget difficulties are certainly not unique among the nation's transit systems. A recent study released by the American Public Transit Association noted that 84% of transit systems in the United States are planning to raise fares and/or decrease service, or have already done so. Metro does provide uniquely direct value to the federal government, and therefore we hope Congress and the states can work together to explore long-term funding sources.

In the midst of all of these challenges, WMATA must also find a new, permanent General Manager. The Council hopes that as the Board begins its search it will solicit input from all of Metro's stakeholders, including its riders and its employees.

Riders have expressed their vision for improvements at Metro. They want more reliable service, greater focus on customers, and clearer, more direct and more frequent communication from Metro, especially when things go wrong. While the General Manager must ensure a safe system, the region also needs a GM able to improve service quality and communicate effectively with the public to restore confidence. The Board should seek a candidate able to address Metro's long-term as well as short-term challenges and listen to stakeholders' views about those challenges.

Safety should top the list of Metro's core values. Effective oversight is also critical to maintaining safety and customer confidence in transit. Still, safety cannot exist in a vacuum. Statistics show that commuting by rail is approximately 34 times safer than driving, and many riders make a daily decision between the two.

Mandates that improve safety while maintaining service quality can greatly enhance transit; mandates that impair service in the long run in the name of safety will only drive commuters to other, more dangerous modes of travel. Transit must be safe; it also must not be permanently hamstrung in ways that actually make travelers across all modes less safe.

We are pleased that Congress is taking a strong interest in the safety and success of the Washington area's transit system. At the same time, safety for commuters in our nation's capital does not start and end with Metrorail. A US Department of Agriculture employee was killed by a driver after the recent snowstorm when the employee tried to walk to the Branch Avenue Metrorail station in Prince George's County, Maryland, where the sidewalks had not been cleared. A military truck closing roads for the recent nuclear security summit killed a bicyclist last week right in downtown DC.

WMATA safety issues have received considerable press recently, but the degree of press attention has been so great specifically because Metrorail fatalities are so rare, while fatalities on roadways are common to the point that we have become inured to these tragedies. This Congress should not ignore these larger safety concerns, and could draw needed attention to them by also conducting oversight into the ways in which our roadway designs, snow removal policies, and traffic law enforcement succeed or fail at maximizing the safety of commuters on all modes.

A safe, reliable, well-maintained and adequately funded Metro system will enrich the entire region, notably including the federal government. I thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony and would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Attachments:

Attachment A – List of Current R.A.C. Members

Attachment B – Letter to Metro Board of Directors Concerning Metro's FY2011 Budget, April 19, 2010

Attachment C – Letter to Metro Board of Directors on FY2011 Budget Development

**Riders' Advisory Council
Roster**

(as of February 3, 2010)

2010 Officers:

Chair:	Frank DeBernardo
District of Columbia Vice-Chair:	David Alpert
Maryland Vice-Chair:	Victoria Wilder
Virginia Vice-Chair:	Dharm Guruswamy

Jurisdiction:

At-Large:

Dharm Guruswamy
Carl Seip
Patrick Sheehan (Accessibility Advisory Committee Chair)

District of Columbia:

David Alpert
Kelsi Bracmort
Patricia Daniels
Kenneth DeGraff
Carol Carter Walker
Diana Zinkl

Maryland:

Sharon Conn (Prince George's County)
Frank DeBernardo (Prince George's County)
Christopher Farrell (Montgomery County)
Ronald Whiting (Montgomery County)
Victoria Wilder (Montgomery County)

Virginia:

Penelope Everline (Arlington County)
Robert Petriner (Fairfax County)
Clayton Sinyai (Fairfax County)
Lorraine Silva (Arlington County)
Evelyn Tomaszewski (Fairfax County)
Lillian White (City of Alexandria)



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Chairman Benjamin and Members of the Board:

This letter serves as the formal position of the WMATA Riders' Advisory Council on the FY2011 Operating Budget, currently estimated to contain a \$189.2 million shortfall.

First, we recognize and appreciate the efforts of the Board of Directors to solicit meaningful public comment on a wide variety of proposals to address the current budget situation. Providing the public with alternatives has spurred public debate and allowed riders to select from a menu of options to create a sound FY2011 budget. We strongly encourage the Board and the Authority to review the FY2011 budget and reduce administrative spending as much as possible to close the projected budget gap.

Over the past several months, our members have held lengthy meetings devoted purely to the budget, attended public hearings, solicited feedback on their commutes, and debated the merits of the many different proposals put forward by WMATA staff, the Board and other groups.

This Council is faced with two distasteful options— service reductions which could drastically impact the quality of life in our region and/or fare increases that might price some residents out of using our transit system.

To limit the need for these drastic options, the R.A.C. continues to strongly support increased jurisdictional subsidies and dedicated local and federal funding for the Metro system. While budgets are tight, we remain hopeful that local and Congressional leaders will fight to expand Metro funding at the jurisdictional and federal level in recognition of the Authority's role as a unique regional and national asset.

We also recognize that Metro will make changes to MetroAccess service, continue negotiations with its operating unions to decrease costs, cut administrative positions, and continue to explore alternative revenue sources in an effort to reduce the budget shortfall in FY2011.

We are deferring to the Accessibility Advisory Committee's recommendations on the proposed changes to MetroAccess, which have already been submitted as part of the public hearing record.

If the Board, after it exhausts all other options to close the FY2011 budget gap, finds that fare increases and service cuts on Metrorail and Metrobus are absolutely necessary, the WMATA Riders' Advisory Council prefers the following proportions and priorities for the Board's decision-making:

If any fare increases should be necessary, we prefer the Board implement them in the following order from least to most undesirable:

1. a) Decreasing the transfer time among all modes from 3 to 2 hours,
b) raising the fare differential for (rail) paper farecards, and
c) instituting a peak-of-peak rail surcharge, *which are preferable to*
2. a) Increasing late-night weekend fares (after midnight),
b) increasing the reserved parking fee, and
c) increasing airport bus fares (with the consideration that steps be taken to protect airport workers), *which are preferable to*
3. a) Increasing bicycle locker rental fees,
b) increasing general parking fees, and
c) increasing express bus fares for non-airport buses, *which are preferable to*
4. Increasing the SmarTrip fare differential on bus, *which is preferable to*
5. Increasing base bus fare along with an increased transfer discount, *which is preferable to*
6. Increasing regular (rush hour) rail fare, *which is preferable to*
7. Increasing reduced (off-peak/weekend) rail fare, *which is preferable to*
8. a) Any special event fares on rail,
b) peak fare surcharges on crowded bus routes, and
c) increasing base bus fare without increasing the transfer discount, *which are preferable to*
9. Reducing the age at which children ride free, from under five years of age to under three years of age.

If any service cuts to Metrorail should be necessary, we prefer the Board implement them in the following order from least to most undesirable:

1. a) Modifying headways and train lengths on four holidays: Columbus Day, Veterans' Day, Martin Luther King's Birthday and Presidents' Day;
b) Restructuring peak service on the Red Line to have 3 min headways from Grosvenor to Silver Spring and 6 min from Silver Spring to Glenmont and Grosvenor to Shady Grove, and
c) early morning weekday headway widening, *which are preferable to*
2. Closing station entrances or mezzanine levels (after a full and transparent review of safety and security issues these closures may cause), *which are preferable to*
3. Weekend headway widening, *which is preferable to*
4. Late night headway widening, *which is preferable to*
5. A later weekday opening time at 5:30am, *which is preferable to*
6. A later weekend opening time at 8:00am, *which is preferable to*
7. a) Earlier weekend closing times and
b) weekend station closures, *which are preferable to*
8. a) Elimination of peak 8-car trains,
b) elimination of Yellow Line service to Fort Totten off-peak/weekends, and
c) elimination of Yellow Line service after 9:30 p.m. and on weekends except for a rail shuttle between King Street - Huntington.

If any service cuts to Metrobus should be necessary, we prefer the Board implement them in the following order from least to most undesirable:

1. a) Reducing and eliminating bus stops after a full and transparent review of cost, safety and security measures that these changes may cause, and
b) reductions in holiday service, *which are preferable to*
2. Eliminating of line segments/local overlap, *which is preferable to*
3. Peak-period headway widening, *which is preferable to*
4. a) Weekend headway widening, and
b) off-peak weekday headway widening.

We strongly recommend that any proposals to eliminate entire bus lines, weekend routes or service, or late-night (after midnight) trips be examined on a case-by-case basis and give consideration to distance and accessibility of alternative route service during peak and off-peak times and route efficiency metrics.

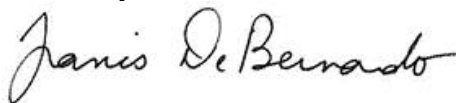
Additionally, we suggest the Board find a middle-ground on many of the aforementioned fare and service changes. Rather than focusing a disproportionate level of service cuts or fare increases on one sector of Metro riders, if any are necessary, we strongly prefer a moderate slate of cuts and increases that is spread more evenly across the entire ridership base.

If the Board must make fare increases and service cuts, we prefer that service cuts represent a very small percentage compared to fare increases. As above, we hope that increased jurisdictional contributions and other savings measures can reduce as much as possible the need for fare increase or service cuts.

As you well know, Metro is our communal responsibility. We all reap the benefits when we commute to work, attend cultural events, and visit friends throughout the region. It is this Council's sincerest desire to work with the Board to find more stable funding solutions so that a budget situation such as this one never happens again.

If you have questions about our proposal or would like to discuss this matter further, please contact myself or Carl Seip, Chairman of the Committee on the Budget, through John Pasek in the Office of the Board Secretary.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Frank DeBernardo".

Frank DeBernardo, Chair



600 Fifth Street NW
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December 8, 2009

Chairman Graham and Members of the Board:

Building on WMATA's recent budget town meetings concerning its FY2011 budget, the Metro Riders' Advisory Council (R.A.C.) would like to provide our initial thoughts on the budget development along with possible suggestions.

In our April 23, 2009 letter on the FY2010 public hearing process and proposed service cuts, this Council stated that the Board "should have presented the public with a full slate of budgetary options, including fare increases, rail service adjustments, and parking rate increases, rather than just asking for public input on a pre-selected list of cuts." As we begin the discussion on the FY2011 budget, we stand by that statement. We would also like to reiterate our March 2009 resolution on Service Adjustments that emphasizes the importance of maintaining basic transportation, safety, equity, alternatives within transit, and communication with the public in any service adjustments.

This Council strongly encourages the Board to present a list of clear and specific alternatives for the FY2011 budget, which give the public an opportunity to debate multiple options at any public hearings. These options should collectively total more than the FY2011 budget gap, to allow for public debate about which to implement and which to table. Meaningful public involvement in this process requires dialogue, debate, and detailed options that riders can comment on, rather than a single option that will likely draw widespread opposition.

We hope that the Board will put forward as many options as possible for public comment. Nothing should be taken off the table prior to analysis by Metro staff and opportunity for feedback by riders. This Council strongly feels that Metro should take a long-range approach to achieving a stable budget for FY2011 and future years to avoid the disruption and uncertainty experienced in FY2010.

A public hearing process that includes numerous budgetary alternatives for FY2011 and beyond is jointly beneficial. The public would be able to collectively weigh the cost and benefits of each individual proposal to cut costs or increase fares – no matter how small – and then comment on them in a substantial way. The Board would, in turn, have greater flexibility in making a final decision that accurately represents the will of the riding public.

We are confident that this approach – with specific fare, fee and budget options made publicly available for consideration by the Board and riders – will enhance the dialogue between the Authority, Board, and riders, and will improve the decision making power of the Board. This Council is well aware that there are many roads leading to a final FY2011 budget; we look

forward to working alongside the Board and general public in evaluating a detailed list of possible budget options.

Additionally, the R.A.C. notes that as part of the last round of fare and parking fee increases approved by the Board in December 2007, staff was directed to "study and report back to the Board of Directors a recommended fare policy that evaluates all aspects of fares, revenues and expenses including distance traveled, time of day, mode, capacity, elasticity and other variables that affect ridership, revenue and expenses." As part of that analysis, the Council requests that the Board fully consider and ask staff to evaluate the following fare and fee suggestions from a revenue and operational standpoint so that they can be discussed and considered in the context of any proposals for the FY2011 budget. Though we withhold judgment on any budgetary solutions at this time, we anticipate greater involvement once an analysis is complete and presented to the public as different alternatives for consideration. We suggest the Authority evaluate:

- Decreasing bus-to-rail and rail-to-bus transfer discounts, and either decreasing or eliminating the SmarTrip discount on Metrobus;
- Introducing a differential between the SmarTrip and paper farecard fare price on Metrorail;
- Adding a fare period on Metrorail during the weekday rush so that the fare structure includes three time-based tiers: reduced, regular, and peak;
- Simplifying the regular fare structure on Metrorail to reflect the three distance-based tiers used during reduced fare hours;
- Instituting an additional Metrobus fare period during the peak hour (during which the bus system is already operating at or near capacity) either system-wide or only on high-ridership bus lines;
- Adjusting the price of open and reserved parking spaces and reserved bike lockers to reduce congestion and wait lists and equalize demand with supply;
- Expanding the hours Metro charges for parking beyond the current schedule
- Creating more pass options for regular and/or occasional users as way to encourage overall ridership and thereby increase revenue. Options could include monthly passes, joint rail/bus passes, and additional short-term passes marketed to visitors.
- Increasing the age at which children accompanied by an adult are able to ride Metro for free, encouraging increased family/group use of Metro, especially at off-peak times when additional capacity exists.

Furthermore, this Council requests the Board and Authority seek out revenue and cost savings through other means, including:

- asking jurisdictions for increased subsidies as well as operational changes;
- increasing revenue from advertising and leasing space on unused Metro-owned land;
- closing low-traffic Metrorail station entrances during off-peak hours;
- ensuring capital purchases do not have higher than industry-standard operational costs.

We also strongly encourage the Board to include any proposed operational changes in the public hearing process. While including these changes as part of any public hearings may not be required, offering riders the opportunity to provide their feedback on such proposals will provide additional guidance for the Board as it makes decisions on Metro's final FY2011 budget. For instance, finding cost savings by cleaning trains less frequently may be unacceptable to riders, who would rather pay extra (or have other services cut) than have a dirtier train. Hearings are an opportunity for the Board to hear rider opinions on tradeoffs such as this.

This Council is acutely aware that many of the proposals suggested above rely on completing essential and long-delayed upgrades to the SmarTrip program. We feel strongly that technology limitations should not hinder options in the FY2011 budget debate, and request that both the Authority and the Board place a renewed focus on completing these upgrades in a timely manner.

In closing, the WMATA Riders' Advisory Council calls upon the Board to request from the General Manager a comprehensive analysis of options for FY2011 (collectively totaling more than the current budget gap), including but not limited to those listed here, that can then be fully evaluated and debated by the Board and riders during the public hearing process.

We do recognize and applaud the efforts of the Board and Authority to engage the public so early in the FY2011 budget process. We hope that meaningful outreach continues and that this Council's recommendations are taken into account when preparing the docket of possible cuts and fare hikes for presentation this winter to transit riders in the Washington D.C. region.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Diana Zinkl", written over a horizontal line.

Diana Zinkl, JD/MCP
Chair, WMATA Riders' Advisory Council