

Statement of
Francis DeBernardo, Chair
Riders' Advisory Council
Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority
Before the
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
Subcommittee on the Federal Workforce, Postal Service and
the District of Columbia
United States House of Representatives

September 23, 2010

Chairman Lynch and Members of the Subcommittee,

Thank you for inviting me to testify today. My name is Francis DeBernardo and I am the 2010 Chair of the WMATA Riders' Advisory Council.

The Riders' Advisory Council was established by WMATA in September 2005 and serves as the riders' voice within Metro. 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; six appointed from each jurisdiction, the District of Columbia, Maryland and Virginia; two members appointed at-large and the Chair of Metro's 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.

Your invitation letter noted that this hearing would focus on the National Transportation Safety Board's Railroad Accident Report on the June 22, 2009 Metrorail collision and the shortcomings in Metro's internal communications and its ineffective safety culture within the organization. As an entity composed specifically of non-Metro employees, it will be difficult for me to comment on Metro's internal workings. However, I would like to focus my testimony today on how Metro's communications with its external stakeholders, namely its customers, affect safety and how, as it rebuilds its safety culture, it must include its riders in that effort and look at safety as part of an overall perspective.

As the National Transportation Safety Board's report on last year's Red Line accident noted, several factors, both human and mechanical, contributed to the collision. The Council is confident that under the leadership of Interim General Manager Sarles, Metro has been

identifying and addressing the mechanical factors that contributed to last year's collision. It is clear that Metro needs the best safety managers and a culture that, from top to bottom, ensures that all employees respect and follow the safety recommendations. Metro has made strides in filling vacancies in its Safety Department. It is our hope that these new employees will provide the foundation for a robust safety culture and that one day, hopefully very soon, the immediate safety crisis will be a memory.

However, in addressing its safety challenges, Metro cannot only look inward for solutions. It must also look to its 1.2 million daily Metrobus, Metrorail and MetroAccess customers on how to address safety concerns and, even more fundamentally, to help identify those concerns.

While I understand that, in the wake of last year's crash, the focus has been on the safety of the train control system and the safety of employees working on Metro's right-of-way, I would also suggest that other aspects of the rider experience are also critical to creating a safe Metro system.

Working to reduce crowding and improve service reliability, along with ensuring that communications with riders are clear, direct and timely will all greatly improve rider safety. Crowded platforms, crumbling platform tiles and broken elevators and escalators pose threats to customers' safety that while not as dramatic as last year's crash, are just as dangerous because of their ubiquity.

We are encouraged that Metro is making some steps to improve its communications with riders that will directly impact safety and security. Earlier this month, Metro's Assistant General Manager for Communications, Customer Service and Marketing, Barbara Richardson, unveiled signage that will prominently feature the telephone number for the Metro Transit Police Department and be installed in buses and railcars to help riders more quickly report problems or safety concerns. This is an example of a rider-suggested change that will directly improve safety for Metro's customers. We look forward to working further with Ms. Richardson and other Metro staff to continue to open the lines of communication between Metro and its riders.

As it rebuilds its safety culture, Metro also needs to rebuild its culture of customer service. Employees, especially front-line employees, who are actively engaged with Metro's customers, will be better able to recognize dangerous or potentially dangerous situations earlier and begin to work to correct them. In addition, an organization that listens to its customers and effectively works to address their concerns makes it more likely that those customers will identify and report safety concerns in the future. Metro's 1.2 million daily riders represent 1.2 million pairs of eyes

and ears on the system every day and are a resource that cannot be taken for granted if Metro truly wants to become safer.

The Council is also encouraged by Metro's recent efforts in tracking and reporting information on service and safety. Its new monthly *Vital Signs* report, which was unveiled over the summer, provides a clear, timely snapshot of Metro's performance, including its safety performance, along with information on the causes of changes in performance metrics and the steps that Metro is taking to improve them. By making this information clearly available to a broad swath of Metro's stakeholders – its employees, staff from its partner jurisdictions, its Board of Directors and its riders Metro makes itself more accountable to its stakeholders and, hopefully, more likely to take steps to improve its performance.

However, improving Metro's and, ultimately the region's safety will require facing head-on the issue of Metro's chronic underfunding, both as a result of 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 billions of dollars in economic value to the region.

Ensuring stable and sufficient capital funding for Metro is necessary to improve safety. The Council appreciates Congress's support for the \$150 million annual federal capital funding for Metro last year and hopes Congress will continue to provide these funds, especially as these funds will be directed specifically to safety improvements. We are also encouraged by the Metro Board of Directors' action in June to approve a \$5 billion, six-year capital funding agreement to ensure that Metro attains and maintains a state of good repair. Unfortunately, these actions leave Metro several billion dollars short of its identified capital needs over the next 10 years and will not fund critical capacity improvements such as more 8-car trains or additional station entrances and exits.

And, as Metro implements its capital program, it must ensure that any safety upgrades look critically at all aspects of safety. As Metro has moved forward on replacing its 1000-series railcars, one of the top recommendations from the NTSB report, it has made decisions regarding seating and door placement that may increase safety but may also contribute to increased crowding. Metro must ensure maintains service quality, while improving safety, because impairing overall 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.

The NTSB has very clearly laid out what it expects from Metro, and Metro has shown that it is moving forward on implementing the NTSB's recommendations. However, riders have also 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. Metro must work to ensure that these two visions complement each other, rather than compete against one another.

A safe, reliable, well-maintained and adequately funded Metro system will contribute to the safety of the entire region. 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

**Riders' Advisory Council
Roster**

(as of February 3, 2010)

2010 Officers:

Chair: Frank DeBernardo
DC Vice-Chair: David Alpert
MD Vice-Chair: Victoria Wilder
VA Vice-Chair: Dharm Guruswamy

Jurisdiction:

At-Large:

Dharm Guruswamy
Carl Seip
Patrick Sheehan (AAC)

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 Petrine (Fairfax County)
Clayton Sinyai (Fairfax County)
Lorraine Silva (Arlington County)
Evelyn Tomaszewski (Fairfax County)
Lillian White (City of Alexandria)