



600 Fifth Street NW
Washington, DC 20001
202-962-2891

October 10, 2008

Chairman Zimmerman and Members of the Board of Directors:

It is my pleasure to present to you the Riders' Advisory Council's (RAC) report for October 2008. While I usually discuss all the presentations RAC and its subcommittees have received in a month, today I want to focus on what we feel is the most important issue we've discussed.

The Council continues to have serious concerns about the scheduled elimination of paper transfers and the companion issue of the status of SmarTrip improvements and availability. It is clear these two issues are inextricably linked.

We believe the riding public, especially vulnerable populations—riders with disabilities, elderly riders, low-income riders, and limited English proficient riders—will be caught unaware of the changes; do not understand all of the implications of the changes; and will not be able to take full advantage of SmarTrip. We are also concerned that premature elimination of traditional paper transfers will undermine much of the hard work that the Authority, the Board and the Riders' Advisory Council (RAC) has done in recent years to improve communications and relations with the riding public.

The Council appreciates the Board's recent attention to this subject – especially the thoughtful discussion of the issues concerning this transition at the October Customer Service, Operations and Safety meeting. The Board has expressed its clear direction that Metro remain focused on the needs of its customers when making such a far-reaching change as the elimination of paper transfers.

As a follow-on to the Council's discussion with Ms. Wilson in September, Cyndi Ziemann, the head of Metro's Office of SmarTrip, and Chris Cipperly from the Office of the Treasurer, attended the RAC's October meeting. I was unable to attend the meeting, but have been apprised of the passionate discussion that was had by those who did attend. Members Kelsi Bracmort (who chaired the meeting in my absence) and Diana Zinkl worked with other members of the RAC to make a comprehensive list of the concerns/comment/suggestions that came out of that meeting. Some are reiterations of concerns we expressed strongly last month, and others are new:

The public is not well informed of impending changes to the current fare media.

Ms. Wilson did come to the September RAC meeting and asked for ideas on a media campaign concerning the coming elimination of paper transfers. At that time, she did not have a campaign to share with us for comment. At the Board's Customer Service Committee meeting on October 2, 2008, Ms. Wilson stated they had a broad advertising campaign planned. Needless to say, it will need to be a very robust effort.

The Council has some additional ideas to help inform riders about SmarTrip and the planned elimination of paper transfers:

- Set up booths at rail stations to educate rail riders about SmarTrip and show rail riders how to use SmarTrip. (This was done when SmarTrip was first introduced.) No such activities have taken place so far aimed at bus riders in coordination with the changes in traditional fare media—i.e., elimination of paper transfers.
- Have WMATA “ambassadors” at rail stations and major bus stops talking about SmarTrip and the elimination of paper transfers. They should have the brochures RAC recommended to Ms. Wilson in September and that she spoke of at the Customer Service meeting.
- Engage in promotional activities, including the distribution of some free SmarTrip cards at various local festivals, etc. I believe this is one of the ways SmarTrip was first introduced. If this is being done, then press releases should be issued so more will know about them.
- Consider offering – at least at first – an incentive of additional value on a SmarTrip card. (WMATA did this in years' past with both paper fare cards and SmarTrip.) For instance, for every \$10 of value loaded on a card, the holder would get an additional 10 cents. This would be a “carrot.” Right now there is only the “stick” of losing the value of a transfer if one doesn't have a SmarTrip card. It would be good to have a positive side as well as the negative to advertise.

We are concerned that known delays in technological improvements to SmarTrip will create hardship for certain riders.

- In the October 1, 2008 briefing on SmarTrip, WMATA staff informed the RAC that buses in Prince George's County (“The Bus”) did not yet have SmarTrip fare boxes and will receive SmarTrip fare boxes Columbus Day weekend. This means transit users in Prince George's County will have less than three months to adapt to the use of SmarTrip before rail-to-bus transfers are eliminated, while District bus riders (and some in other jurisdictions) have had SmarTrip for more than four years.

- The “Senior SmarTrip” program is new and senior riders have had little time to adapt to this new fare system. Not being able to get a paper transfer and not using SmarTrip will almost double an elderly rider’s fare when transferring from rail to bus, from 35 cents to 60 cents.
- SmarTrip does not yet accommodate passes. WMATA staff reported that by mid-2009 SmarTrip cards will carry passes as well as the current pay-as-you-go debit system and allow pass holders to transfer from rail-to-bus at the \$0.35 rate. Staff had no suggestions as to how pass holders should proceed with transfers from January 4, 2009 until this change is adopted. Clearly, the ability to use the passes needs to start when paper transfers are eliminated – whenever that is – January 4, 2009 or later.
- The SmarTrip program lacks limited- or single-use fare media that can take advantage of the new system for transferring rail-to-bus and bus-to-bus. The RAC understands that limited-use SmarTrip cards are one of the improvements that is behind schedule. Without this option, occasional users, visitors to the National Capital Region and regular users who have lost or forgotten a SmarTrip card have no way to take advantage of transfer discounts other than buying a new SmarTrip card for \$5.

We are concerned that access to SmarTrip cards and equipment are limited, particularly for bus riders and residents of the District. These access issues, combined with the lack of publicity to date surrounding the changes to accepted fare media provide the potential for confusion, delays and hardship come January 4, 2009.

- Currently, SmarTrip cards are available for sale via vending machines at outlying rail stations with parking lots, over the WMATA website with a credit card, and at a limited number of locations primarily open during business hours. This lack of availability has been a barrier for riders who do not have internet access, credit cards, or occasion to visit outlying stations, or who do not use the rail system at all.
- Options for adding fare for bus riders are limited. SmarTrip boxes on buses allow riders to add fare only via cash while boarding the bus. Bus riders—unlike rail users, cannot use credit cards, debit cards or paper metro cards to add fare to their SmarTrip account. Moreover, bus riders must add fare while other riders wait behind them, creating delays that SmarTrip was intended to avoid.

The WMATA staff response that bus riders should use fare machines at rail stations represents a considerable inconvenience, particularly for bus riders with disabilities or those who live far from rail stations.

- SmarTrip usage on bus routes indicates that bus riders are still adapting to SmarTrip. Currently, less than 30 percent of bus rides are paid for using SmarTrip. While the rates of SmarTrip usage are much higher on some “commuter-oriented” routes, on some “all-day” routes, the rate is less than 20 percent.
- WMATA needs to have SmarTrip card machines – to both dispense cards and to add fare to them – available at locations along bus routes. RAC is pleased to hear that various retailers have been approached and asked to accommodate such machines. We understand locations include Giant Food Stores. We hope they also include Safeway and CVS – two other retailers who have locations along major bus routes. It is imperative that such machines be in place when paper transfers are eliminated and customers must rely solely on SmarTrip cards if they are to get the benefit of a transfer.
- Currently, SmarTrip fareboxes on buses are not accessible to persons with visual impairments. Again, this is an access issue that needs to be corrected before the elimination of paper transfers.

In addition to the above listed concerns associated with the elimination of traditional fare media, the RAC also has ongoing concerns with several other aspects of SmarTrip.

- **The cost of SmarTrip cards for very low income riders.** The RAC appreciates that as a part of the January 2008 fare adjustments, WMATA made 50,000 cards available at no cost through area social services agencies. However, recent reports indicate that many of these cards have not been distributed. In addition, this was described as a one-time distribution by WMATA, and the RAC has concerns about future SmarTrip access for very low income populations as these cards reach the end of their useful life and need to be replaced.
- **Lack of transparency in rider SmarTrip “account information.”** SmarTrip works like a debit card, however, there is currently no way for riders to see an “account statement.” The Customer Service line, fare boxes and fare machines can offer an account balance only. One of the delayed SmarTrip improvements would add a web-based system for SmarTrip users to see a “statement” of all reported use. This option is currently scheduled for implementation in 2010. Until then, there is no way for a SmarTrip holder to reconcile their SmarTrip account balance. In order to avoid issues with overdrawing a debit or credit card, this improvement needs to be made sooner than 2010.
- **Lack of fare options as part of SmarTrip.** The current SmarTrip system of “one ride, one fare” debit-only option is narrow in comparison to the

range of fare options available in other transit systems. The RAC welcomes the changes in SmarTrip that will allow riders to purchase and use passes through SmarTrip and hopes both the Board and WMATA Staff will consider adding fare options in the future. Such new fare options could include reduced fare for registered college students during non-peak hours, etc.

The RAC is supportive of SmarTrip and wants to see the promised improvements to it happen sooner rather than later.

We appreciate the Board's continued attention to the concomitant issues of the elimination of paper transfers and improvements to the SmarTrip program. It is clear that until the promised upgrades to the SmarTrip program – including greater availability of ways to purchase and add fare to the cards -- are made, going "paperless" will be a hardship on riders.

Sincerely,

Nancy Iacomini
Chairman

cc: John Catoe, General Manager
Sara Wilson, Assistant General Manager, Corporate Strategy and Communications
Cyndi Zieman, Director, Office of SmarTrip