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September 25, 2008

Chairman Zimmerman and Members of the Board of Directors:

It is my pleasure to present to you the Riders' Advisory Council's report for September 2008.

The Council was pleased to welcome five new members to its September meeting as the result of appointments that the Board made in July. These new members bring fresh perspectives to the Council and we look forward to their participation with the RAC.

System Infrastructure Renewal Program – Red Line:

Dave Couch attended our regular September meeting and briefed us on Metro's plans for its System Infrastructure Renewal Program, and focused on discussing the Red Line stations that are scheduled to be done first as they are among Metro's oldest stations. We are pleased the implementation of this program is designed to minimize passenger inconvenience by shifting work from weekends to weeknights. Mr. Couch noted Metro is mindful of the needs of riders and is limiting changes to train headways and disruption of station interiors during revenue hours so that the Renewal Program will be "invisible" to customers. The Council hopes that Metro will stick with its plans for a robust outreach and customer information program – both online and through signs and information posted at rail stations – to keep riders up-to-date on the projects and their progress.

The Council was encouraged by Mr. Couch's stating that should a service disruption occur unrelated to the rehabilitation project, such as a malfunctioning train or switch, Metro will place its highest priority on restoring service, including curtailing rehabilitation work if necessary, until the disruption is cleared and headway times are restored. We hope Metro will commit to enhanced supervision during work periods and ensure that there is also clear communication and coordination between Metrorail and Metrobus staff so that rehabilitation-related train delays will not cause riders to miss connecting buses, especially since many of the buses will be running on 30-minute or more headways during the late weekday evenings when work is taking place.

Plant Maintenance Overview:

Paul Gillum, Director of Metro's Office of Plant Maintenance, met with the RAC's Rail Subcommittee and gave an overview of the duties and responsibilities of his office in terms of keeping Metro stations and other facilities in a state of good repair. Of particular interest to Subcommittee members was Metro's "Station Enhancement" program, which renews Metrorail stations every three-and-a-half years. As the Metro system ages, such periodic "refreshings" of facilities will become increasingly important until more in-depth renovations can be made as part of Metro's Capital Improvement Program. It was also interesting to hear of some of the distinctions in maintenance – for instance, that daily station cleaning comes under the Line Managers and not his maintenance division. We were also reminded that escalator and elevator outages, repairs and maintenance do not fall under Mr. Gillum's domain.

Bus On-Time Performance:

Assistant General Manager for Bus Services Milo Victoria and Joe Vicente, the IT Manager for Bus Services, attended the Council's Bus Subcommittee to provide an overview of Metro's efforts to integrate the various electronic monitoring systems on its buses and to calculate bus on-time performance. As the Board is aware, Metrobus was able to integrate all of their data collection systems in July 2008. Their presentation highlighted the advancements Metro has made in its ability to gather data about passenger counts, bus on-time performance and other factors which influence customers' trips. It was encouraging to hear of Metro's plans to use this data to make improvements in service. We look forward to hearing about the strategies Metro will use to make service improvements and increase on-time performance once it has had an opportunity to review successive months of data.

Riders always have questions about bus service – and one I hear often is about “bus bunching” on various lines. I know a large focus of Metro's bus corridor studies (like the 30s-line study and the ongoing 16th Street Line study) is to address bus bunching issues. I hope this new data will help managers and supervisors work on the issue of bunching on other lines.

Paper Transfer Elimination:

Sara Wilson, Metro's Assistant General Manager for Corporate Strategy and Communications, requested to come to our September meeting. She solicited from us ideas for Metro's outreach plans to alert riders that the era of the paper transfer – bus and rail – is rapidly coming to an end.

Members of the RAC are extremely concerned about Metro's preparations for the planned elimination of paper rail-to-bus and bus-to-bus transfers, which is still scheduled, to the best of my knowledge, to become effective January 4, 2009. While this change in the way Metro has done business since its beginning was advertised as part of the fare hearings the Board conducted back in November of 2007, it was overshadowed by the discussion on the increases in fares and parking fees. Most riders are unaware that this change will be taking place in just over three months.

Council members made several suggestions. The RAC wants to ensure that riders affected by the change are provided with clear, noticeable messages in locations where they will be seen by customers. This includes prominent signage on buses, such as on the bulkhead behind the driver and on overhead advertising space. Distinctive signage should also be provided on the rail-to-bus transfer machines located in rail stations. Banners announcing the change should also be used in rail stations. Brochures should be provided in “Take One” racks on buses and at rail stations in case customers have more detailed questions or need information in languages other than English. Signage in stations and on buses should alert passengers to the existence of these brochures – and also direct them to more information that will be on WMATA's webpage.

We hope that Metro will also supplement its signage with audio announcements both on buses and in the rail system and will provide those announcements in English and Spanish. The rail announcements should be made on trains as well as in the stations themselves.

On a personal note, while I know that WMATA will have the upcoming changes noted on their website, this notification (and may I say “warning”) should already be on the website. I would urge you to place a prominent note on the page that details fares and discusses rates with transfers NOW. It is never too early to remind folks about what will happen in early 2009. The more it is seen, the more it will be remembered. Even though I attended the fare increase hearings last year, and participated in RAC meetings and heard staff presentations concerning the fare increase and its attendant changes in paper transfers, it even fell off of my radar screen until Ms. Wilson asked to come present to us.

Status of SmarTrip

Due to the obviously close nature of the elimination of transfers and SmarTrip, at times our discussion with Ms. Wilson moved from the topic at hand – the elimination of paper transfers – to our deep concern about the status of the SmarTrip program. I regret that we were unable to better coordinate Ms. Wilson’s discussion with the RAC about transfers with a broader discussion and presentation on the upcoming changes to SmarTrip. The Council had been requesting a presentation from the SmarTrip folks since the Spring, and had been unsuccessful in getting anyone from the office to come and speak with us until recently. We are hoping to have the new Director of Metro’s Office of SmarTrip at our October meeting. (And yes, I did read the article in the September 22, 2008 Washington Post.)

The Council is concerned about the availability of locations for customers to purchase and, more importantly, to reload their SmarTrip cards. Many bus riders whose travels do not take them through Metrorail stations need better access to machines that will allow them to reload their cards either at bus transfer facilities or at handy neighborhood retailers like CVS and Giant. However, it is our understanding that a significant expansion of SmarTrip reloading stations will not occur until Spring 2009, months after the elimination of paper transfers. And I would emphasize that reloading a card is different from obtaining a card. Not all machines that give cards can add more value to them. Right now riders use the special add fare machines in rail stations and at a few other locations.

Of greatest concern is that elements of the plan to expand SmarTrip still remain uncertain. It is unclear whether the “Balanced Transfer,” which would allow for a discount when transferring from bus-to-rail as well as from rail-to-bus would also be implemented on January 4th in concert with the elimination of paper transfers. RAC understand that this has been the goal – but will it happen? Yes or no?

It is also unclear, as noted above, what additional efforts will be undertaken to sell cards to riders that may not have them and to increase the number of locations where they can be reloaded. Will riders, in January, 2009, have many options to obtain and reload (via any method – cash, debit or credit card) a SmarTrip card? Yes or no? And if the answer is “no,” then I would say the majority of RAC members are not in favor of going “paperless” in January.

By current estimates, over half of Metrobus riders pay their fares with cash or use paper bus-to-bus transfers. The elimination of paper transfers will ultimately have positive effects for passengers and Metro – lengthening the transfer period from two hours to three, reducing the time it takes to board, reducing fraud and disputes with operators about transfer validity and allowing Metro to better plan and schedule buses by providing more accurate passenger counts. To reiterate, the RAC is concerned this change will not be “ready for primetime” - particularly because of concerns about SmarTrip -- come January, 2009.

We look forward to working with the Board and Metro staff to make these changes successful. However, we ask that the Board ensure that the timing of these changes will be driven by Metro's readiness to implement the changes, rather than simply by a date fixed on the calendar several months ago.

I am hopeful the consultant the Board authorized in July and will vote on later in this meeting will assure forward progress for the clearly troubled SmarTrip program and WMATA will not be throwing good money after bad.

Kojo Nnamdi Show Appearance:

Patrick Sheehan, the Chairman of Metro's Elderly and Disabled Committee and I were guests on WAMU's "Kojo Nnamdi Show" on Monday, September 15th. We had the opportunity to take questions from listeners and discuss the progress that both the Riders' Advisory Council and Metro as a whole has made in becoming more inclusive of riders' input and using that input to help guide its decision-making and make improvements in various areas. We did have a great number of questions relating to bus operations. I've asked RAC's staff person, John Pasek, to forward on to the appropriate WMATA departments comments we received on the show – not for the purpose of providing answers, but to make them aware that there are folks out there who are interested and have comments about the operations under their purview.

As always, I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

Nancy Iacomini, Chairman