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Chairman Zimmerman and Members of the Board of Directors:

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

Random Bag Inspection Policy:

Representatives from the Metro Transit Police Department, including Chief Michael Taborn and Deputy Chief Mark Olson, attended the Council's December meeting and gave an overview of Metro's random bag inspection policy, which was adopted by the General Manager in October. Also, eight members of the public had come to speak in our Public Comment period, and they spoke on this same topic. All were in opposition to the inspection policy.

Following the presentation, the Chief and other Transit Police officers present engaged in a question-and-answer period with the Council. Council members brought up several concerns:

Passenger Inconvenience or Delay:

Due to the high volume of passengers at many Metrorail stations, there was concern a backlog of riders waiting to have their bags inspected could develop. While officers present assured the Council such queues would not happen, members remained skeptical and wondered how the situation would be handled. Would the random count being used change from every 14th passenger to every 20th? Would people in line be dismissed? Who would decide the line was too long and stop the searches?

The concern about delay was also raised in relation to searches of Metrobus passengers at bus stops, especially because buses generally arrive/depart with much less frequency than trains. We were relieved by the Chief's very clear statement that these searches "will not have a passenger miss his/her bus."

Some members wondered if the process would cause less delay to commuters if appropriately-trained dogs were used exclusively.

It was also suggested that police officers provide individuals who are searched with a note indicating their participation in the search program and to serve as a record for their employer in case the search delays them on their commute. It is our understanding this is done in New York City.

Impact on Vulnerable Populations:

Members shared concerns about the negative affects of the searches on immigrants and members of minority communities, many of whom come from places with a different dynamic between police and citizens.

Concerns were also raised about the need for officers participating in the inspections to be well-trained in customer relations. We hope Metro will reach out to various community groups to receive suggestions on how to conduct these searches in as sensitive a manner as possible. They need to be mindful of the needs of passengers with disabilities, as well as to the concerns of parents of children and infants in strollers who just might be picked under the "no exceptions/ random search" policy.

The Council also hopes that the Transit Police will take advantage of and build on its officers' existing multiple language capabilities when conducting these searches.

Need for Additional Information About the Program:

There was a consensus that Metro should provide more information to members of the public about how the program will be conducted when and if it is implemented.

For example, Metro's website could include a video showing members of the public what to expect from a bag inspection or other information about what the inspections would entail. As police conducting the random searches will take action against individuals carrying any illegal items into the Metro system -- not just explosives -- members of the Council felt it would also be helpful to include on the website a listing of items that would trigger a police response if discovered during a random inspection. It is understood there is a variance among jurisdictions about what is illegal and what is not, and so appropriate links should be provided on the website.

Members also wanted to be sure the random bag search program would not deplete the number of regular officers patrolling the Metro system and its environs. RAC does not want to see the level of policing done on a day to day basis suffer because of the random searches.

Following the question-and-answer period and discussion among members, the Council approved a resolution calling on the Metro Board and the General Manger to convene at least one public meeting at a time and place convenient to the public, at which Metro administration would present information on the inspection policy and to give the public sufficient opportunity to make comments and ask questions about the policy. The resolution expressed the hope at least one such meeting would be held before the General Manager actually implemented the program. The motion was approved by a vote of 13-2.

Through this motion the Council wanted to acknowledge the sincere, passionate albeit opposite points of view that have emerged since this program was announced by the General Manager. I believe that our motion reflects that dynamic tension between freedom and safety that marks the democracy of the United States.

Customer Delivery Standards:

Deputy General Manager Gerald Francis and Christian Kent, Assistant General Manager for Access Services, also gave the Council a brief presentation regarding Metro's development of "customer delivery standards." These standards, which will provide customer-focused measurements of Metro's performance, offer tremendous promise to make Metro more transparent and responsive to the riders it serves. The RAC is very excited about working with Metro staff to establish specific standards relating to these service delivery goals as well as identifying additional goals.

We look forward to receiving the draft document we were promised at the meeting so RAC members can begin studying the proposal and add our good thoughts.

Metro Website:

Sadly, due to the length of time the Council spent on the important issue of random bag searches, it was not able to hear a planned presentation on WMATA's new website. However, since our meeting was held on December 3, and the new site was set to go "live" on December 8, it was decided we could offer our comments after experimenting with the new site.

As noted, the RAC, like other users of the site, is still exploring the redesigned pages and looks forward to providing any comments or suggestions for improvement to staff from Metro's Department of Information Technology. Metro's Assistant General Manager of Information Technology and I discussed the idea of having a self-selected working group, composed of Council members, that would meet as needed to discuss and provide feedback on information technology-related issues, especially as they relate to the website. This is an idea that I will pass along to the new chairman when he or she takes office in January.

Inauguration Planning:

I know the Authority has done and is continuing to do a great deal of planning for this historic event. What is unique about this Inauguration is not only the unprecedented number of attendees expected, but also the number of details that will remain unknown right up until the event because of security and other concerns. I would urge Metro to ready as many elements as possible under its direct control ahead of time - ensuring escalators, elevators and public address systems are in top working order, stationing extra personnel throughout the system, and removing temporary construction barriers or equipment to improve passenger flow - because there will doubtless be numerous situations outside of its control that will arise the day of the event.

The safe movement of people through stations will be a very important part of the success of the day. I am distressed to hear that Metro is contemplating leaving all escalators stationary that day. It is imperative that escalators at least be allowed to run in the "up" position. While I can understand keeping escalators stationary for those walking down them, great harm could be done to riders by not providing escalators in the up position. Elevators will be

overwhelmed and people, in their heavy winter clothes, will attempt to walk up escalators and may well encounter physical distress. Many people who will be visiting that day simply will not know, when they start out, just how steep and hard it can be to climb a stationary escalator.

Finally, on a personal note, I would like to say it has been an honor to serve as the Council's chairman this past year. I believe there were several accomplishments of which we – members of the RAC, members of the Board and Metro staff – can be justifiably proud. We all need to continue to work together to ensure that improvements to customer service continue to move forward. We all need to make sure the transition to “paperless transfers” goes smoothly, and that the anticipated improvements to the SmarTrip program happen in a timely way.

Sincerely,

Nancy Iacomini
Chairman