

Prepared Statement of

MetroRiders.Org

On Various Options to Close WMATA's Estimated FY'2010 Operating Budget Gap

January 27, 2010
Washington, D.C.

Summary: MetroRiders.Org (1) opposes proposed Metro service cuts; (2) believes WMATA's Contributing Jurisdictions should modestly increase their subsidy levels to WMATA or at least explain on the record why they can't; and (3) strongly supports Option 4 and its higher Metro fares to help close the current budget gap.

I am Kevin Moore, a Director of MetroRiders.Org,¹ an organization of volunteers representing the interests of transit users in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. We thank the WMATA Board for scheduling this hearing to receive public input on the most equitable actions that the Board can take to close an estimated \$40 million revenue gap between March 1 and June 30, 2010, in its adopted FY'2010 Operating Budget.

In short, MetroRiders.org is convinced that, given WMATA's immediate need to close this year-end budget gap, and considering the looming \$190 million operating budget deficit projected for next year, all Metro users will need to pay substantially higher fares and fees to keep the Metrorail and Metrobus system functioning at a high level of safety, dependability and convenience.

■ WMATA's Public Hearing Process on Budget Options is Getting Better But Still Needs Much Improvement

WMATA's setting out four distinct policy options on which comment is sought has been helpful to us. This is an improvement over the recent past.²

¹ See <http://www.metroriders.org>

²There were no options outlined by WMATA in advance of the Town Hall meetings on Metro's budget problems held this past October and November in the District of Columbia, Virginia and Maryland, and thus public comment on realistic revenue and expense options was not as focused as it might have been. There was no docket of comments received and WMATA staff produced no detailed analysis of comments received. (Most Board members seemed knowledgeable only about the comments received at the individual session(s) they attended.)

MetroRiders.Org hopes that when WMATA schedules public hearings on how to close the estimated \$190 million gap in the FY'2011 Operating Budget, and similar hearings on each succeeding year's proposed budgets: (1) options will again be outlined in advance with cost/revenue estimates for each element so that public comment can be focused and helpful to the Board; (2) a public docket of comments received will be maintained; and (3) a detailed summary and analysis of all comments received will be prepared for Board and public information.

We were, however, disappointed by the District of Columbia's vetoing public comment on a broader range of revenue and expense options to close the current budget gap. We believe each jurisdiction's veto power should be limited to WMATA decisions that have demonstrable fiscal or service impacts on that jurisdiction -- and constraining the public's ability to comment on a broader range of options at a public hearing does not satisfy that test.

■ **Contributing Jurisdictions Should Be Required to Participate Transparently in WMATA Budget Processes**

Similarly, the Board's choice of four options took "off the table" without any opportunity for public debate whether WMATA's Contributing Jurisdictions³ should be urged to help cover part of this \$40 million budget gap -- or at least to respond in a transparent process why they can't afford to meet passengers part way in closing the gap.

Until the recent appointment of Federal members to the WMATA Board, past Board members -- as here -- just accepted in silence and secrecy the funding limits established by the Contributing Jurisdictions that appointed them -- and that could replace them -- without any option for transparency, public comment and debate. We hope the new Federal members of the WMATA Board will not tolerate those backroom decisions between the Board and the Contributing Jurisdictions with no transparency as to why those jurisdictions can't help solve WMATA's critical budget problems.

Yes, all State and local governments have severe budget problems but so do individual Metro riders. These governments must do their utmost to preserve and strengthen our Metrorail and Metrobus system. Our regional transit system is essential for economically healthy communities, a clean environment, and keeping transportation affordable -- objectives of the Contributing Jurisdictions as well.

MetroRiders.Org Recommendations

We urge WMATA to address the FY'2010 operating budget deficit with the following actions:

- **No cuts in Metrorail or Metrobus service – as had been proposed in Option 1.** WMATA should adhere to two primary principles: to preserve (1) peak period capacity and (2) off-peak frequency. In particular, we are opposed to the following proposed actions:
 - Increasing Metrorail headways from 20 to 30 minutes on weekday evenings and weekend nights; and 15 to 20 minutes on Sundays.
 - Reducing 8-car trains to 6-car trains during rush hour.
 - Cutting bus service that will leave many riders waiting long periods in the cold, rain and heat.

³ The District of Columbia, the State of Maryland, and the Cities of Alexandria, Fairfax and Falls Church, and Arlington and Fairfax Counties (all in VA).

- **There should have been an Option 5 – which MetroRiders.Org would have supported: increasing Metro fares and parking fees to raise \$16 million through June 30 so that \$6.4 million won't have to be borrowed from the capital budget and added to next year's budget gap.**

Again, the District of Columbia's veto of this option was unfortunate. If the Contributing Jurisdictions can't modestly increase their subsidy levels to help cover today's operating budget gap, riders must increase their contributions to assure that WMATA doesn't fall into a "death cycle" of deteriorating Metro service and dependability and, as a result, continually declining ridership. . . .And borrowing \$6.4 million from WMATA's capital fund will just make next year's budget gap even larger.

- **Balance the remaining FY'2010 shortfall by adopting Option 4 -- a combination of, basically, a 10 cent across-the-board fare increase (\$9.6 million) and temporarily borrowing \$6.4 million from the capital fund.**

As noted, we believe other choices would have given us better options. But given the urgent need to address this year-end budget gap, MetroRiders.Org strongly supports Board adoption of Option 4 as the best of limited options.⁴

■ **Other Long-Term Cost Savings Option**

- **Priority Treatment for Buses:** Implement cost savings by securing the commitment of State and area local governments for more efficient movement of buses within the region. Those governments' transportation departments must cooperate by giving buses priority in movement on area roads. Bus priority treatments should include dedicated bus lanes, queue jumpers, and signal priority. Bus stop placements should also be reviewed to eliminate stops that are too close together.

Again, MetroRiders.Org thanks the WMATA Board for scheduling this important public hearing to hear riders' views on how the current budget gap can be eliminated. I'd be pleased to answer any questions.

⁴ In addition, more flexibility in what will be charged for on- and off-peak and late night service would have been a fairer and more strategic approach to balancing the budget. It is unfair to burden a short distance off-peak bus rider with the same cost increase as a long distance peak period rail rider. We would have preferred that this option raise fares proportionate to the overall price of the trip and to tie fare changes to minimizing ridership impacts. An off-peak fare increase for bus riders is likely to depress ridership more than an on-peak fare increase.

Also, increased parking fees at Metro lots should have at least been proposed for consideration. While parking demand has decreased, parking revenues could still help pay for transit access for all riders, regardless of car ownership status. Also, peak demand at some parking facilities continues to be high enough to raise rates without losing many customers.