



COALITION FOR SMARTER GROWTH

Testimony of Stewart Schwartz re Metro Budget

Fairfax Hearing – Oakton HS

March 22, 2010

My name is Stewart Schwartz and I am the Executive Director of the Coalition for Smarter Growth. We are a 13 year old organization working with communities to address the interconnected issues of transportation, land use, housing, urban design, energy and the environment. I have been a Metrorail user since 1988 and also use Metrobus, Fairfax Connector and DASH bus services.

Our core position on the Metro budget proposal is to oppose the severe service cuts. In a joint campaign with partner conservation and transit advocacy groups, www.fairshareformetro.com, we advocate for \$74 million in additional funding from the Metro jurisdictions. This will fund the \$40 million unaccounted for and avoid the \$34 million in service cuts. If the public is being asked to pay higher fares, then they should not also be asked to endure severe service cuts as well. It is fair to ask for the jurisdictional member governments to provide the additional funding.

Among the cuts are ending Yellow Line service to Huntington and into the heart of the city on evenings and weekends, with direct impact on service to National Airport, the city's revival and transit-oriented revitalization in the Huntington area. Ending 8 car trains and redefining "Orange Crush" on the Orange Line. Up to ½ hour waits evenings and weekends. Ending 16 bus routes and reducing buses on 50 others.

We fear that the combination of fare hikes and service cuts will result in the oft cited "death spiral" for the system. In the case of the "choice" riders, once we lose them, they may never come back. In the case of workers and the disabled without other options the lose of service could mean loss of jobs, exacerbating the recession. At a minimum it will mean additional strain on family budgets. As riders leave the system, driving and traffic will increase, impacting corporate locations to the area – they may decide not to come. Continued decline in transit service will undermine transit-oriented development and new plans such as Tysons Corner. We will be reducing transit service just when we have learned how important it is in providing an alternative to high energy prices. Transit has become critical in attracting young professionals who own cars at much lower rates than earlier generations and it will become even more critical as the share of seniors increases.

Our www.fairshareformetro.com campaign proposes that Metro jurisdictions provide \$74 million to avoid service cuts. For Northern Virginia jurisdictions that works out to approximately \$9 million for Fairfax, \$4.5 million for Arlington, \$2.6 million for Alexandria, \$150,000 for City of Fairfax and \$200,000 for the City of Falls Church. We realize the strains on local governments amid this budget crisis, but Metro provides an essential service for this region.

We wish to assure you that we will also go to bat with the state and federal governments to find additional support as well. The State of Virginia has never provided the level of support for transit that

it should. Transit has rarely risen above about 9% of the total transportation budget. It is allocated 14.7 percent of the capital budget and receives too little assistance for operating costs. But the support has to begin with the local governments – any additional support from Virginia or the Federal governments can be used to reduce fare increases.

We note an interesting comparison – that a project recently advanced as a priority, the widening of just a one mile section of Telegraph Road in Fairfax, will cost \$20 million. Compare that to the \$34 million in transit service cuts. Twenty million dollars for just one mile of road -- that makes transit investments look very, very efficient.

We are frustrated that the recent jobs bill, which included a \$20 million bailout of the federal transportation program (borrowed money being transferred from the general fund) is being distributed under existing formulas. If there were ever a time in this country when we need to focus on maintenance and operations of what we've already built – our roads and transit systems – then now is the time.

We also need gain ridership, funding and cost savings from greater efficiency. Bus priority corridors with buses running on dedicated lanes, is one key efficiency measure. It allows buses to achieve greater speed and on-time performance, attract more riders and carry more riders with fewer buses and fewer drivers. Better bus information including maps, route branding and NextBus can also increase ridership and farebox recovery.

We also have to consider how important the pattern of our development is to the efficiency of many services including transit. Transit will carry more riders if we have the density to support it. Spread out suburban development is more costly to serve. Linear transit corridors can be designed for the mixed-use, walkable redevelopment that we can and need to do throughout the region. Even the goal of moving more Metro Access users to regular bus service would be easier if we created more housing options in higher density transit corridors. This will be increasingly important as our population ages and seniors look to downsize while staying in the community.

Our push for additional funding for Metro is also tied to supporting initiatives for stronger leadership, greater accountability and transparency, and installation of a safety culture at the agency.

To conclude, we urge Metro jurisdictions to provide an additional \$74 million to avoid the severe service cuts. If we also gain support from other sources including the state of Virginia and the federal government, those resources can help to reduce the fare increase.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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