

Press Release

For Immediate Release:
January 16, 2020

Contact:
Stewart Schwartz
703-599-6437 (cell)

Leadership Needed to Fund More Bus and Rail Service

CSG response to proposed WMATA fare and service changes

Washington DC: The Coalition for Smarter Growth weighed in today on the proposed WMATA budget, fare and service changes.

“We are very concerned about the proposed bus service cuts, deeply troubled by the dueling responses by the jurisdictions as they debate who pays what, and frustrated by the lack of unified commitment to improving bus and rail service,” said Stewart Schwartz, Executive Director of the Coalition for Smarter Growth. “At the same time that the WMATA Board has endorsed the Bus Transformation Project, the proposed budget is going in the wrong direction. This is largely because of the arbitrary 3% cost cap.”

“We commend WMATA for seeking ways to increase ridership in spite of the arbitrary 3% cost cap, and support some of the recommendations but oppose others.” Of the General Manager’s budget recommendations, the Coalition for Smarter Growth supports the following:

- Free transfers between trains and buses
- Increased weekend frequency on rail and a number of bus lines
- Restoration of some late-night rail hours
- A \$2 flat rail fare on weekends
- No change to bus fares
- Reduced price for the 7-day pass and prior reductions in the cost of the monthly pass
 - We agree with NVTC that that WMATA integrate local providers into pass products, increase the availability and usage of pass products (especially the unlimited monthly pass), and improve integration with SmartBenefits.

However, we oppose:

- Increasing the base rail fare
 - People living in walkable communities, and without a car, use transit frequently throughout

the day and week, and most trips are non-work trips. Many are shorter trips in the city and inner suburbs. This fare will discourage this transit use and reduce the value of car-free living.

- Adding \$1 to the maximum fare for the longest trips, which will discourage use of transit in the suburbs.
- Charging people a .25 fee for using cash or adding funds to SmartTrip on the bus
 - We are concerned about the equity impacts, specifically to the majority of bus riders, who are low income. While this additional fee will encourage people to buy and load their SmartTrip cards prior to getting on the bus, and will help to speed bus trips and save bus operating costs, we are concerned about adding this fee before we have solved the problem of providing extensive access for purchasing and reloading SmartTrip cards for low income riders.
- The extensive bus service cuts
 - Some service changes may make sense if done in conjunction with adoption of free transfers
 - Others may make sense if there is nearby and equivalent access to another bus line
 - However, we share the concerns we are hearing from those who will lose the bus service they depend upon. Many of these cuts will severely impact transit-dependent riders. It is the wrong direction to go, with the Board having just endorsed a plan to transform regional bus service. Two transit advocates we've spoken to said the following:
 - "I am concerned about how these cuts will impact the most vulnerable amongst us, e.g., those who can't afford to live near a Metrorail station. [For] the folks I've been talking to who are affected by the Cinder Bed Road and would see one of the routes cut that hasn't operated since 24 Oct(!) is just a slap in the face... Overall it feels like buses are in the transit death spiral, even if rail is improving. This budget will only make it worse."
 - "While I understand the need to find efficiencies with bus service, I'm also wary of making cuts at a time when Metrobus is experiencing fairly significant declines in ridership."
 - Instead of cutting service with low ridership, whether urban or suburban, we should be designing the service to be more frequent in order to grow ridership. Instead of dozens of piecemeal service changes, we need a full route network redesign study – one that includes both WMATA and local bus services.

"Proposed bus service cuts and the dueling counterproposals by Virginia and Maryland on fares reinforce the need to speedily implement the findings of the Bus Transformation Project (BTP) on which we served," said Schwartz. "The BTP report, endorsed today by the WMATA Board, calls for the bus to be the mode of choice. To be transformed with frequent, reliable service dedicated bus lanes, and more affordable fares."

"In the BTP study we also cited the need for a bus champion – a task force of regional officials that would make better buses their top priority. Instead we see a confused discussion lacking in a clear and unified commitment to expanding bus service, making it more frequent and reliable, ensuring affordable access to jobs, and providing the funding we need for affordable fares and extensive coverage."

"The significant constraint is the arbitrary 3% cost growth cap imposed first by the Virginia legislature and adopted by necessity by the other jurisdictions to achieve consensus on the dedicated funding for Metro. It's time to remove that cap because of its harmful impact on bus riders, and lower income riders in particular," said Schwartz.

“Given the region’s traffic, the cost of living, the need to help people work their way out of poverty, and the need to urgently reduce vehicle miles traveled and greenhouse gas emissions, we should be pouring more resources into our region’s transit services and making those services the best that they can be,” said Schwartz. “The contrast between how this region speeds ahead with destructive, 12-lane, multi-billion toll road projects, builds \$100 million interchanges, and widens road after road, while we fight over funding our transit services, couldn’t be more stark.”

“This is why we have renewed our partnership with the region’s business leaders in the MetroNow coalition, to campaign for the most significant improvements and reforms recommended in the Bus Transformation study. We call on our elected leaders to unify in a commitment to increase transit funding, expand rail and bus service, and ensure it is more frequent, more reliable, and more affordable. We cannot afford to wait,” concluded Schwartz.

###