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House of Representatives

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Opening Statement
Ranking Member Gerald E. Connolly
Subcommittee on Government Operations
Hearing on “WMATA After SafeTrack”
March 29, 2017

Thank you, Chairman Meadows for convening this hearing, and thank you to our witnesses – WMATA General Manager Paul Wiedefeld, WMATA Chief Financial Officer Dennis Anosike, and our representative from the Government Accountability Office (GAO), Dr. Mark Goldstein.

Today, we will examine the shortcomings and benefits of the yearlong WMATA rehabilitation program, SafeTrack, as outlined in the GAO Report, “Improved Planning of Future Rehabilitation Projects Could Prevent Limitations Identified with SafeTrack” (GAO-17-348). This report confirmed that SafeTrack will not fix all of WMATA’s systemic and organizational deficiencies, but we should welcome GAO’s assessment that SafeTrack demonstrates that WMATA is “committed to preventative maintenance, including the repairing of track assets before they break and cause more cost and safety impacts on Metrorail riders.”

The report did identify some concerns with SafeTrack planning and implementation. While preparing for SafeTrack, WMATA did not collect adequate data on the condition of rail and non-rail assets, did not consider the cost or potential impact on safety outcomes of alternatives to SafeTrack, and provided only limited advance notice to local stakeholders about the significant disruptions that SafeTrack would cause.

However, WMATA has improved the collection and monitoring of work performance data, enhanced communication with local jurisdictions, established independent reviews of SafeTrack work, and responded quickly to concerns raised by its safety regulator, the Federal Transit Administration (FTA).

I look forward to hearing from WMATA, GAO, and my colleagues on ways in which we can promote the adoption of GAO’s recommendations for improved project planning procedures at WMATA.

We should also use this opportunity to examine the broader challenges facing the nation’s transit system and better understand the resources it urgently needs to reestablish Metro as a safe,

reliable transit system that serves the people of the Metropolitan Capital region, the federal workforce, and the 19.3 million visitors who come to their nation's capital each year.

It should come as no surprise that a congressional committee tasked with ensuring the efficiency of the federal government and the safety of its workforce has a vested interest in the success of the transit system that delivers more than one-third of the area's federal employees to work each day. In March 2016, when Metro announced that it would shut down for 24 hours to conduct emergency inspections, the first question on everyone's mind was how the federal government's Office of Personnel Management would accommodate the closure, unlike any other transit system in the United States. The federal government is the primary stakeholder in this transit system, and I look forward to working with my colleagues to ensure that federal support for Metro is commensurate to its fundamental reliance on the system. As federal stakeholders, I think our organizing principle should be that failure of Metro is not an option.

For several years now, WMATA has been a system in crisis – all lights blinking red. The lack of a strict safety culture has resulted in derailments, falsified track inspection reports, fires, major track defects, and has actually claimed lives. Reliability concerns and a crisis in customer confidence are depressing ridership by a magnitude that is driving down national transit ridership numbers, and new fare increases coupled with service cuts are expected to claim as many as 14 million trips in FY2018. Members of the WMATA Board of Directors have appeared at times wholly incapable of resuscitating, much less managing Metro. As someone who has spent more than 21 years working on Metro-related issues – including rezoning property around Metro stations to maximize their potential, approving the local operating subsidy, and helping create the local tax districts to fund construction of the new Silver Line – it has been personally painful to watch Board dysfunction imperil the transit system our region has invested in and relies on for its mobility. Such dysfunction is especially discouraging in light of the fact that WMATA will need the support and confidence of all stakeholders in order to solve its short- and long-term budget crises.

General Manager Wiedefeld deserves credit for taking decisive action to promote system safety. After successive asset failures in the spring of 2016, GM Wiedefeld implemented a 24-hour shutdown of the system and later unveiled SafeTrack. By the end of SafeTrack, WMATA will have completed three years of maintenance in one year, including the replacement of 50,000 rail ties. In the wake of the March 15, 2016 shutdown, I cautioned GM Wiedefeld, "this cannot be the answer long-term. You get to shutdown the system once, but I do not think you get to do it again, at least with any credibility." The completion of SafeTrack, a new industry standard preventative maintenance program, the Back2Good program, and the soon-to-be established Metro Safety Commission must cure what ails Metro's safety culture. Public confidence might not endure another stunning demonstration of system-wide failure.

WMATA is beginning to implement the GM's Back2Good program – a comprehensive effort to improve safety, reduce delays related to track defects and rail car failures, and develop a balanced budget. It is imperative that WMATA define success for this program in terms of

metrics the public can understand. What are our safety and level of service goals? What can riders and other stakeholders expect from the system if Back2Good is successful?

In February of this year, my colleagues from the Metropolitan DC delegation and I requested that GAO conduct a study of the safety, governance, budget, and labor issues facing WMATA and make recommendations for possible reforms on these and other fronts. The Governor of Virginia, Terry McAuliffe, has initiated a similar review headed by former Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood. These and other reform efforts spearheaded by business and transportation organizations should work in a coordinated fashion with leadership here in Congress to chart our path forward.

Given the dire budget situation laid out by the GM, it is immediately apparent that any reform effort and commitment to improved WMATA operations must come with new resources, including a dedicated funding source that can help WMATA address its operating and capital funding deficits. The federal government must be a contributor to this fiscal solution on both the operating and capital sides of the house. This starts with the full funding and reauthorization of the \$150 million annual federal commitment for capital improvements – which is matched by Virginia, Maryland, and D.C. WMATA’s problems were not created overnight, and the system faces a long ascent to just being “good” again. Reforms and new funding sources must go hand-in-hand if WMATA is going to pull out of its death spiral.

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