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House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM

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Opening Statement

Ranking Member Gerald E. Connolly (VA-11)

Subcommittee on Government Operations

Hearing on “*Oversight of WMATA’s Safety and Maintenance*”

December 2, 2016

Chairman Mica and Chairman Meadows, I appreciate yet another opportunity to discuss the safety, service, and budget challenges faced by the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (Metro). Each time this Committee revisits this topic and exercises its federal oversight prerogative with regards to Metro, we are reminded of the close relationship between the functionality of the federal government and the health of the national capital’s transit system.

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, 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.

When this Committee held a hearing on Metro in April, the system was in crisis. All lights were blinking red. The hearing and witness testimony enumerated the system’s mounting crises in leadership, safety, customer confidence, and finances. It was clear that the situation required bold and immediate action and that the status quo for Metro was a rail to perdition.

The purpose of the hearing today is to examine whether or not Metro has stepped back from the precipice of total disaster and whether and how the system can set a trajectory for safe, reliable, and sustainable operations.

Unfortunately, the leadership crisis at Metro has evolved rather than diminished. After going 10 months without a general manager, Metro finally has someone at the helm, and General Manager Paul Wiedefeld has demonstrated he understands that the problems plaguing Metro are systemic. One does not have to agree with every major decision he makes to appreciate the fact that thank God he is willing to make them. He came to the position with desperately needed relevant experience in transportation, and he is pushing a paradigm shift in Metro’s safety culture and on many other fronts.

The enduring leadership crisis at Metro resides in the WMATA Board of Directors. Some Board Members seem bent on proving that the governing body is wholly incapable of resuscitating, much less managing Metro. Threats to scrap a major expansion of Metro to Dulles International Airport pit jurisdiction against jurisdiction and fracture any hope for the true regionalism necessary for Metro's success. Regardless of whether this is a daring gambit to prove that the Board is in fact so dysfunctional that a federal takeover is our only option or just intemperate rhetoric, it is reckless.

I have spent the past 21 years working on Metro related issues. First as a member of the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors and then as Chairman of the County for five years, I made appointments to the Metro Board, rezoned property around Metro stations to maximize their potential, approved the local operating subsidy, and helped create the local tax districts to fund construction of the new Silver Line. In Congress, I have helped secure the \$150 million annual federal commitment for safety improvements – which is matched by Virginia, Maryland, and D.C., helped secure federal financing for the Silver Line, and helped provide robust oversight through our work on this Committee.

So it is personally painful to witness members of the WMATA Board so mismanage an institution this region has invested in and relies on for its mobility. From a congressional perspective, threats to cancel major federal investments, rampant parochialism, and political theater on the Board destabilize efforts to secure an increased and appropriate level of federal support.

General Manager Wiedefeld deserves credit for taking the initiative within 6 months of becoming GM to begin a sweeping program that will seek to carry out three years' worth of maintenance in one year. Leading up to the announcement of SafeTrack in May, fires, major track defects, and arcing incidents – including one that claimed the life of Carol Glover – had exposed a dire maintenance situation at Metro.

While SafeTrack gives us something tangible to point to when assessing efforts to improve Metro safety, the safety problems at Metro go far beyond the replacement of high voltage cables and defective third-rail insulators. I welcome the SafeTrack metrics from Metro that include the replacement of 26,000 crossties and 10,000 fasteners since the beginning of the maintenance blitz. However, this week the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) released a report on the East Falls Church derailment in July that found, once again, Metro track inspectors were not conducting inspections in accordance with written policy and responding to defects in real time. Indeed, NTSB found clear evidence that Metro safety inspectors deliberately falsified their reports – endangering public safety once again. In the report, the NTSB also reiterated its recommendation that the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) assume safety oversight of Metro. The report stated “the [Federal Transit Administration (FTA)] oversight model lacks minimum safety standards, expertise, and the resources to provide assurance that corrective action plans are completed.” I have repeatedly shared my concern that the FTA does not have the tools necessary to provide robust oversight of Metro, and this is something we must revisit as we work to standup a permanent safety commission.

The customer confidence picture continues to worsen. Ridership is already down 13 percent in FY2017, SafeTrack has been disruptive to commuters, and pending proposals for increased fares and diminished service could only hasten a vicious downward spiral in ridership and revenue.

As the General Manager noted in his FY2018 Proposed Operating Budget, the primary cause of Metro's current budget challenge – a \$290 million budget gap – is declining rail ridership, which has been on this downward trajectory since 2009. Fortunately, there is an effort from management to assert the primacy of safety in Metro culture and improve reliability that could go a long way in restoring faith in the system, boosting ridership, and bringing desperately needed operating revenue.

Going forward, staff reductions, service cuts, and fare increases are not going to bring long-term stability to Metro finances. Metro is the only major transit system without a dedicated funding source, and the system instead relies upon a patchwork of subsidies from local jurisdictions. Metro receives 47 percent of its operating budget from local and state subsidies and zero percent from a dedicated revenue source. For the MBTA in Boston, those figures are reversed, with zero percent coming from a local subsidy and 64 percent from a dedicated revenue source. In my role as Chairman of the Fairfax Board of Supervisors in 2004, I helped launch the blue ribbon panel on Metro funding that ultimately recommended a regional sales tax and called on the federal government to “participate significantly in addressing the projected shortfall for capital maintenance and system enhancement, since Metro service is a critical service for effective federal operations.”

There is clearly an appetite for Metro to meet certain safety and reliability metrics before new funding commitments are made. However, lamentations about performance will not solve Metro's problems if we continue to ignore the dysfunctionality of the Metro Board, the culture of indifference that pervades the workforce, and the absence of stable revenue any transit system requires to operate.

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