

Washington, DC transit system faces massive budget shortfall as it resumes near pre-pandemic service levels

By Harvey Simpkins
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The Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) is facing the worst financial crisis in its 50-year history due to a massive drop in ridership since the onset of the pandemic in March. The transit system is currently losing \$2.5 million in revenue each weekday because of a 90 percent drop in ridership on its bus and rail lines.

To date, WMATA, also known as Metro, has been able to stay afloat because it received \$767 million from the Federal CARES Act, passed in late March. With this infusion of money, WMATA has not laid off or furloughed any of its staff of about 10,000 employees. However, according to WMATA General Manager Paul Wiedefeld, the CARES Act funding will run out later this year.

Wiedefeld reported at a July 28 press conference that the funding “allowed us to protect the health of our workforce and customers by allowing us to take actions such as altering work schedules and using rear door boarding to minimize exposure to the virus.”

For the 2021 Fiscal Year, which began on July 1, Metro’s Board passed a \$2.07 billion operating budget. Metro reports that \$438 million of the CARES Act funds will support the 2021 budget, replacing some of the lost revenue from the ridership decline.

For Fiscal Year 2020, 36 percent of WMATA’s revenues came from parking and transit fares, totaling \$723 million. Assuming a loss of \$2.5 million in revenue each weekday, the system has lost about \$228 million for the period April 1 through August 7, or almost one-third of the annual amount received from riders.

WMATA also receives about 60 percent of its operating budget from state and local governments in

Virginia, Maryland and the District of Columbia. However, the amount of future funding from these sources remains in doubt, as all face budget shortfalls due to the pandemic and the resulting economic slowdown.

WMATA does not expect ridership to recover until January 2021 at the earliest. Even that projection is likely optimistic as the pandemic is not contained in the Washington metropolitan region and commuters remain reluctant to use public transportation if they have other options. For the last 30 days, Virginia’s seven day moving average of daily new cases has been between 782-1137; for Maryland, between 518-940; and the District of Columbia, between 53-76.

With Congress’ failure to pass a new financial relief package last week, WMATA faces the prospect of drastic service cuts and the furlough of thousands of employees as early as September. In addition, without further federal aid, WMATA says it may delay completion of the extension of the Silver Line to Dulles Airport, currently projected to open next year, and scrap plans to buy new rail cars.

Wiedefeld warned at the July 28 press conference that “without additional federal funds, we are left with some very difficult choices to deal with a looming financial crisis that run counter to the economic recovery we all want.”

Even if Republicans and Democrats agree on new legislation, the likely sum devoted to public transportation nationwide will be about \$15 billion, with about \$800 million going to Metro. This will be insufficient to prevent employee furloughs and service reductions.

Joe McAndrew, managing director for transportation

at the Greater Washington Partnership, told the *Washington Post*, “What we keep hearing, if there is any [transit] funding, it may fall closer to \$15 billion, which is not adequate.”

The transit system is set to restore rail service to near pre-COVID levels on August 16 and bus service to 73 percent of pre-pandemic levels on August 23. The rail system will add 15 hours more service per week, with opening times returning to normal and the system closing at 11 p.m. each night.

On March 17, Metro closed 19 rail stations, about 20 percent of the total. On May 23, it fully shut down the Silver line, due to low ridership and the need to do repair work to facilitate the completion of the line extension. After the DC region largely shut down from late-March through most of May, rail ridership collapsed to about 5 percent of pre-pandemic levels. WMATA says it is now at about 10 percent.

WMATA responded to the drop in ridership by also cutting the frequency of trains and buses. As a result, overcrowding remains a concern and maintaining safe social distancing is impossible on many trips. In its July monthly report to Metro’s Board, Metro’s Rider Advisory Council (RAC) noted that they are “deeply concerned about ongoing reports of severe crowding on numerous routes — especially those serving lower-income communities in our region.”

“Daily bus ridership has long been well above the socially distanced capacity of 85,000 trips as specified in WMATA’s Pandemic Recovery Plan,” the RAC wrote in its report. “Even in the ‘managed re-entry’ phase expected to begin in the coming weeks, Metrobus capacity is only planned to be 110,00 trips, wholly insufficient for current ridership.”

In July, about 130,000 bus trips were taken each weekday, or 20,000 above the system’s August 23 planned capacity. Metro reports that 70 percent of the bus rides during the pandemic have been work trips, indicating that many workers who are forced to remain on the job during the pandemic rely on the transit system.

In a July information brief, WMATA conceded that it cannot maintain safe social distance guidelines under its current budgetary restrictions. To maintain proper distance would require “five times the level of service to carry the same number of customers as under normal service conditions. While Metro will use these

guidelines to inform the timing of service increases, optimal distancing will be challenging even when accompanied by regional efforts to stagger worker re-entry.”

According to local National Public Radio affiliate WAMU, as of two weeks ago, Metro has had 210 employees with confirmed COVID cases and no deaths. About 90 percent of Metro workers who had the coronavirus have returned to work. In May, however, a bus driver for the DC Circulator system, operated by the District of Columbia Department of Transportation, died from the virus.

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