



To: General Manager Wiedefeld and members of the WMATA board
From: MetroNow Coalition
Date: March 15, 2021
RE: WMATA's Fiscal Year 2022 Budget

The MetroNow Coalition is made up of regional leaders from the business, non-profit, and advocacy communities who believe that transit is essential to the economic health and vitality of our region. We thank WMATA and especially the Metrobus and Metrorail operators who have risked their health and safety to keep our region moving throughout the pandemic.

Fiscal Year 2021 (FY21) was a year of crisis, both for WMATA and the world. It was also a year that yielded an abundance of lessons to learn from. First and foremost, the pandemic left no doubt about the critical role of public transit -- especially the [importance of buses](#). FY21 also proved the agility and creativity of WMATA staff, who [worked tirelessly throughout the pandemic to provide innovative solutions](#), such as the Lifeline bus routes, to safely and efficiently serve our region's riders. Finally, the pandemic reminded us that transit's historical focus on the commute, and peak hour service based on a 9 to 5 schedule, leaves behind the other 80% of trips we take in our lives.

While we anticipate continued uncertainty through Fiscal Year 2022 (FY22), which starts July 1, 2021, there is optimism that the region is on a path to emerge from this crisis. [The Biden Administration expects that a majority](#) of the country will be vaccinated by the end of 2021, and we expect the region will be gearing up to safely reopen our economy through this year. The WMATA FY22 budget must acknowledge public transit's role as a key driver for the economic recovery of this region, while also thinking creatively about the highest-impact investments for building a more sustainable, equitable and inclusive transit system for the long-term.

We are grateful that the American Rescue Plan will provide a projected [\\$1.4 billion of additional relief for transit in the region](#), allowing [WMATA to avoid the painful service reductions and layoffs](#) that were on the table for the second half of FY22. We appreciate [WMATA's work to incorporate this new federal](#) relief into a revised [FY22 budget](#) by April, 2021, and we look forward to WMATA communicating these changes with the public as soon as possible.

With this in mind, the MetroNow Coalition respectfully offers the following comments as WMATA prepares a new FY22 budget:

1. Make Equity the Cornerstone of Transit Recovery

- a. Accelerate the Bus Transformation Project:** Improvements to bus service can greatly improve regional transportation equity. The pandemic showed how critical bus service is, especially for low-income residents and the essential workforce. In 2019, WMATA concluded the Bus Transformation Project (BTP), a multi-year effort to assess regional bus service which resulted in twenty-six recommendations, including a transit equity framework and a regional bus network redesign. The low-hanging fruit recommendations that came out of BTP remain stalled. We strongly encourage WMATA to move quickly to finish work on items like adding the major bus corridors to the Metrorail system map and including the region's bus providers on WMATA's monthly passes. WMATA must continue to prioritize investments in the BTP. We applaud the Metro Board's adoption of the [Transit Equity Framework](#) in FY21 -- a critical first step to reexamine how we prioritize service and transit investment. The FY22 budget should include funding to launch a regionally coordinated bus network redesign to ensure that WMATA and local bus services can best meet the region's demands. Should WMATA have excess funding from federal COVID relief or infrastructure stimulus, investments to accelerate the BTP should be prioritized.
- b. Prioritize Low-Income Riders:** The pandemic has been hardest on low-income residents, especially those that were considered essential and have not been able to work from home, or lost their jobs entirely. We applaud WMATA's work throughout the pandemic to create the Lifeline Network, preserve routes that serve essential workers, and increase frequency on routes with high ridership to reduce crowding. Before the pandemic, [WMATA and the District were exploring low-income fare products](#). We strongly encourage WMATA to re-engage in that effort this year. By focusing on providing more frequent, reliable, and affordable service, especially for low-income riders, WMATA can improve access, increase economic opportunity, and support a more equitable recovery for our region.
- c. Eliminate the Transfer Penalty:** Riders who transfer between bus and rail only receive a \$0.50 discount, which can be a burden for low-income riders who must choose between the fastest bus-rail route or the cheapest multiple-bus route. Increasing the discount to \$1 was adopted in the original pre-pandemic FY21 budget. WMATA should eliminate the transfer penalty entirely between bus and rail in the coming years. This will create a more equitable transit system and prevent price-sensitive low-income riders from making unnecessary multiple-bus trips that would be better served by bus-rail trips.

- d. **Restore Late-Night Service:** The lack of late-night transit options hurts workers and businesses that operate outside of the traditional 9-to-5 schedule. This is especially critical as we look to support economic recovery for businesses that were hardest hit by COVID -- restaurants and entertainment venues -- and support their ability to bring employees back to jobs. Late-night service is an equity issue as well. [A 2019 American Public Transportation Association report](#) found that those who work between the hours of 4 p.m. and 6 a.m are often less educated and make less money than those who work the day shift; their annual median wage is \$30,000, about \$5,000 lower than the median wage of daytime employees. A 24-hour bus network can service many of these workers, but it needs to be robust, reliable, and frequent enough for late-night workers to get to work and home on time. We encourage WMATA to use federal transit relief for FY22 to work to create a 24 hour bus network to provide the span and frequency needed to serve late night workers on bus.

2. Recognize WMATA's Essential Role in the Region's Economic Recovery

- a. **Aggressively pursue a return to pre-pandemic levels of service, but shift the service patterns to best meet demand:** Without robust WMATA service, the region will not be able to fully reopen. Without a fully functioning transit network, many residents, especially low-income residents, will struggle to access jobs, schools and opportunities, further compounding inequities in our society. If WMATA misses out on a strong, coordinated return of ridership, there are also long-term funding implications. [The MWCOG Voices of the Region Survey](#) noted that of frequent public transportation users pre-pandemic, 44 percent would be more likely to use transit if service were more frequent.

However, returning to the pre-pandemic service pattern based on peak hour weekly commuters may prove wasteful. The elevated levels of remote work will continue this year and post pandemic, which will significantly reduce peak hour demand and fare revenues. On the one hand this could reduce extreme crowding on buses and rail, but it would also suggest the need to adjust and redeploy service for more frequent all-day and weekend service to support the workforce and families that do not have a 9-5 schedule and make transit more viable for non-commute trips. Pre-pandemic, most trips in the region were not for non-work purposes, and the share of commute trips was shrinking over recent years. More frequent all-day and weekend service would better support the *MAJORITY* of the region's travel needs and likely capture more trips, which can increase ridership. We encourage WMATA to plan and publicly message a strategy that the agency will ramp up service during

FY22 *and* shift its rail and bus service strategy to provide more frequent all day service that best meets the region's travel needs.

- b. Clearly communicate the timeline for more frequent, reliable service:** By communicating clear benchmarks and timelines for a return to pre-COVID levels of service, WMATA can support the region's employers, educators, and service providers in their reopening planning efforts. The region is ready to work together, but it must start with clear, frequent, and effective communication from WMATA.
 - c. Continue COVID safety measures and investments in ventilation:** We applaud the incredible work WMATA has done to keep riders and employees safe throughout the COVID pandemic. Though there is [little evidence that mass transit poses a risk of coronavirus outbreaks](#), and [even less evidence of transmission of COVID via surfaces](#), this is still an important area to address to build trust for riders. We encourage WMATA to continue to invest in ventilation improvements and promote mask wearing to reduce transmission of aerosols through FY22.
 - d. Continue to reduce the backlog in preventative maintenance and advance major capital rehabilitation:** WMATA's Capital Improvement Program (CIP) is rightly prioritizing safety, reliability, and state of good repair. Prior to the pandemic, it contributed directly to growth in ridership. We support the Board's actions during the pandemic to speed up the investment program and complete projects ahead of schedule, taking advantage of the low ridership period. The increase of the CIP to more than \$2 billion in FY21 is also promising and shows growth in the agency's ability to plan and execute its capital program. Please do not lose focus on this critical investment strategy as the region reopens. Recapitalizing the system is critical for the region's long-term success and fulfills the promise made to the jurisdictions in [2018 as part of the historic dedicated funding deal](#).
- 3. Innovate**
- a. Create a Bulk Transit Pass Program for Employers:** Even before the pandemic, many employees who could use transit, chose not to because it was not convenient. During the pandemic, hundreds of thousands of employees throughout the region stopped using transit altogether. Inspired by other metro areas in the U.S., a bulk transit pass program can make it easier for employees to try transit, ease costs and administrative burdens for employers, lower parking costs and roadway congestion levels, and increase WMATA's ridership--a core goal for the agency.



- b. Pilot global rail maintenance practices during the low ridership period:** Similar to speeding up the state of good repair schedules during the pandemic's low ridership period, we strongly encourage the agency to place greater focus and energy to explore and adopt better maintenance strategies that will provide the region great ROI for years to come. The region requires a transit system that is reliable at more hours of the day than is currently offered. We understand that decisions were made generations ago that limit the maintenance hours of the Metrorail system. However, other agencies throughout the world such as Munich's S-Bahn have adopted innovative strategies to get more accomplished during their maintenance periods. We encourage WMATA to rapidly develop and pilot a maintenance strategy, while ridership is still low over the next 5-months, to conduct necessary maintenance work near the levels deployed by global leaders like the S-Bahn, Tokyo Railways, and the London Underground.

Thank you for considering our comments as you finalize WMATA's FY 2022 budget. As representatives of the region's business, non-profit, and advocacy communities, our success is dependent on WMATA's success. We will continue to fight for additional federal, state, and local support for transit so WMATA and our local transit systems can make it through these turbulent times and we can continue to expand the quality, frequency, and reach of our region's transit network.

- The MetroNow Coalition