

Testimony of Peter Benjamin
Chairman, Board of Directors
Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority
before the Subcommittee on Transportation, Housing and Urban Development,
and Related Agencies of the U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations
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Madam Chairman, Ranking Member Bond, and Members of the Subcommittee, I am honored to appear before you today as the Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (Metro). Metro's General Manager, Richard Sarles, will cover the agency's specific initiatives with regard to improved safety and service. I would like to provide the context for Metro's fiscal year 2011 appropriations request by giving the Subcommittee some background about the Metro system and our capital needs.

Metro Serves the Federal Government

The problem of mass transportation in the Washington area is critical. It is also a problem in which the federal government has a unique interest and responsibility... improved transportation in this area is essential for the continued and effective performance of the functions of the government of the United States, for the welfare of the District of Columbia, [and] for the orderly growth and development of the National Capital region.

-President Lyndon Johnson
1965 letter to Congress

It may surprise you to learn that Metro's relationship with the Congress began over a hundred years ago, just a few yards away from where we are sitting today. In 1906, when the subway was built connecting the U.S. Capitol to the Senate Office Building (now the Russell Building), people started thinking about building a subway for the city. The *Washington Post* published an article in 1909 titled, "Why Not a Real Subway System for Washington?" A 1931 *Post* article included a map of downtown Washington showing possible subway routes.

In 1955, Congress became directly involved in the discussion, and approved \$500,000 to have the National Capital Planning Commission conduct a "Mass Transportation Survey" for the Washington region. The results of that survey led to passage of the National Capital Transportation Act of 1960, which created an independent federal agency to plan a regional system of highways and mass transit to serve the Nation's Capital. In 1966, Congress authorized the creation of the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority as an interstate compact agency of the State of Maryland, the Commonwealth of Virginia, and the District of Columbia to plan, finance and construct a rail transit system for the region, and early the following year Metro was "born."

Today, the federal government is uniquely dependent upon Metro, something that distinguishes Metro from other U.S. transit systems. Half of all Metrorail stations are located at federal facilities, and about 40 percent of peak ridership consists of federal employees. A quick listing of some of our rail stations demonstrates Metro's close connection to the federal government: Federal Triangle, Smithsonian, Capitol South, Navy Yard, Pentagon, and Arlington Cemetery, to name a few. It is not surprising that in 2005, a "Blue Ribbon" report found that the federal government, the region's largest employer, is the "largest single beneficiary" of Metro.

The federal government is particularly reliant on Metro for special national events such as inaugurations and state funerals, transportation of visitors to the Nation's Capital and persons doing business with the federal government. Without Metro, it is hard to imagine how this region would have handled the massive influx of visitors who came to attend the inauguration of President Obama in January 2009. Metro carried one and a half million riders on Inauguration Day, providing attendees with a convenient – albeit crowded – transportation alternative.

Federal disaster recovery plans in this region rely heavily on Metro, and Metro played a key role on September 11, 2001, in moving people out of the downtown core. People were able to rush home to their families because Metro employees stayed on the job, operating trains and buses, staffing stations, and coordinating service from a command center. Other federal plans, such as the BRAC-related consolidation of Walter Reed Army Medical Center and Bethesda Naval Hospital, also depend upon Metro; the consolidated facility, which will serve tens of thousands of patients and visitors annually, will be located at the Medical Center Metrorail station.

In fact, it is fair to say that Metro is the backbone of daily federal government operations. During the recent snowstorms, when it was impossible to operate Metrobuses safely on surface streets and to run Metrorail trains on above-ground tracks, the federal government decided to close. With well over 100,000 federal employees regularly commuting by Metro, and thousands of others using Metro to access federal facilities every day, the federal government depends heavily upon the system.

Metro's Capital Needs

Congress recognized the federal government's unique relationship with Metro when it passed the Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act of 2008 ("PRIIA", P.L. 110-432), which authorized \$1.5 billion for Metro's capital and preventive maintenance needs, to be equally matched by Metro's state and local funding partners. I want to thank this Subcommittee and your colleagues in Congress for appropriating the first installment of that authorization last year. We are requesting that another \$150 million be appropriated in federal fiscal year 2011, as provided for in the President's FY2011 budget request.

Why is this funding so important to Metro? Because we have a 34-year old rail system, which is not like it used to be when it was new. It has old rail cars, track bed, power equipment, and communications systems. More than half of our bus garages are over 50 years old and some buses are 15 years old. As the equipment and facilities age they become less reliable, break down more often, and need more maintenance. We have to replace our tracks, trains, and buses, and must rehabilitate our stations, bridges, and maintenance facilities. We have 30-year-old ventilation, lighting, and communications systems which must be maintained or replaced. Some of our station platforms are crumbling, our escalators and elevators need major repairs, and water is leaking into our tunnels. We must do all of the work required while providing service to hundreds of thousands of customers daily.

We have been fortunate in that our funding partners – the federal government as well as the state and local jurisdictions that we serve -- have demonstrated strong support for Metro's capital program. As a result, Metro has been able to build out and operate a full 106-mile rail system, run a fleet of 1500 buses, and provide paratransit service to thousands of customers with disabilities. We have also been able to make a number of critical investments in the system, including, for the first time, running 8-car trains. (When the Metro system first opened in 1976, we ran 4-car trains – hard to imagine today!)

Going forward, however, Metro needs increased investment to keep the system in a state of good repair. We are currently developing our capital program for the next six years. I expect that our state and local funding partners will not only continue, but will increase, their current level of funding to Metro, and in addition will match the new federal funding stream authorized in PRIIA. The PRIIA funding itself is essential not just to leverage these additional contributions, but to help us at Metro address our most critical needs, such as replacing our oldest rail cars and rehabilitating our oldest segments of track.

I hope that I have made clear why this funding is important to Metro. I hope that it is also clear why this funding should be important to the Congress. The PRIIA funds will allow us to make urgently needed investments in the aging infrastructure of our system so that we can continue to provide federal employees, residents of the metropolitan area, and visitors to the Nation's capital from across the nation and around the world, with safe and reliable service. Annual appropriations under PRIIA are essential if we are to keep our system in a state of good repair.

On behalf of Metro's Board of Directors, I thank you for your long history of support for Metro and your leadership in providing funding for the rehabilitation of Metro facilities and replacement of Metro equipment. It is no understatement to say that just as the federal government depends upon Metro, the future of Metro now depends upon the federal government and the funding authorized under PRIIA. Thank you for allowing me to testify today, and I look forward to answering the Committee's questions.