



Opening Statement
of
Chairman Edolphus Towns

Committee on Oversight and Government Reform

“The Washington Metro System: Safety, Service, and
Stability”

April 21, 2010

Good morning and thank you all for being here.

The Washington Metropolitan Transit Authority (“WMATA”) operates the second largest rail transit system in the country, second only to the New York subway system. WMATA also runs the fifth largest bus system.

For a long time now, it has been a clean, reliable, and safe system. But there are indications that the system is deteriorating.

On June 22, 2009, a Metrorail train slammed into another train near the Fort Totten station. Nine people were killed and 80 were injured. It was the worst accident in Metro’s history.

In January of this year, two maintenance workers were killed as they worked on the tracks. In total, 15 people have lost their lives on the Metrorail system over the past year.

Something clearly is wrong.

Earlier this year, Senator Mikulski asked the Federal Transit Administration to audit WMATA and its safety regulator, the Tri-State Oversight Committee, known as the "TOC." The FTA found serious shortcomings in the safety culture at WMATA.

To me, the most surprising thing was this: Even though the TOC has the responsibility to oversee safety on the Metro system, the TOC has no full time staff. It has no inspectors, and no auditors. Moreover, it has no enforcement power.

The FTA has no enforcement power over Metro, either.

In other words, Metrorail is pretty much on the honor system when it comes to safety.

That's why it is extremely important for Metro to have top-notch management. I think the safety problems we are seeing now at Metro are symptomatic of a larger problem, particularly on the rail system: years of deferred maintenance and management problems are taking their toll.

In February, some WMATA Board Members asked a well respected former Metro General Manager, David Gunn, to conduct a review of the entire Metro operation.

Mr. Gunn spent two weeks performing a broad review of the rail and bus system. He spoke to managers and line employees, and rode the entire rail system.

Unfortunately, Mr. Gunn is retired and living in Canada and couldn't be here today, but we were able to obtain a copy of the presentation he made to a closed-door meeting of the Board of Directors last month.

Gunn told the Board that the bus system is in pretty good shape. But the rail system is in serious decline.

According to Gunn, Metrorail has major organizational and managerial problems. For example, he found that there was so much bad blood between the maintenance and engineering departments that they literally would not even speak to each other.

Deferred maintenance has reached the crisis stage. Gunn said that in the two weeks he rode the rail system, there were two derailments, one of which he witnessed. He also found a broken rail on the main line. In addition, seven station platforms – which are made of reinforced concrete – were being shored up by wood.

Gunn concluded—and he told the WMATA Board – that “Metro Rail has downhill momentum which will be difficult to stop.”

We aren't going to solve these problems today, but I think Gunn's findings highlight the importance of WMATA's search for a new General Manager. The selection of a new General Manager, with the operational experience and the

managerial authority to do what is necessary, is likely to be key to reversing the decline.

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