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Testimony of Raymond Jackson
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Before
The U.S. House of Representatives Government Oversight Committee's Subcommittee on Transportation and Public Assets
December 2, 2016

Mr. Chairman, Ranking and Committee Members,

My name is Raymond Jackson and I am the Second Vice President of ATU Local 689. Today I am here to give employee insight into the SafeTrack program and the challenges that are facing the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) in the near and distant future.

For years, Local 689 has been advocating for major changes in the way WMATA does business. We have repeatedly asked WMATA to provide front line employees with the tools and materials necessary to do their jobs, and we've raised concerns about getting preventative maintenance done ahead of time, instead of kicking the can down the road year after year. The reality is that if work had been done over the past twenty years, WMATA would not be disrupting the lives of people in this region in the way that they have these past six months. Unfortunately, SafeTrack is what riders of this region are left with after decades of mismanagement and neglect.

How Did We Get Here?

When SafeTrack was first introduced, Local 689 was hopeful that it would mark a departure from the culture and old practices at WMATA. As things have progressed, we are now concerned that WMATA's failure to consult with our union and with experienced employees on the ground will be its fatal flaw. Had our input been solicited, we would have worked to find a better way of getting the work done without disrupting the lives of so many riders in this region. We all have members of our families that ride Metro daily, and most of us ride the system as well, so we know the frustrations with SafeTrack firsthand. In addition to the inconvenience of service disruptions, WMATA's continued reliance on contractors to do work that can be done by Local 689 members has become a way for private companies with no investment in the system to make boatloads of money at the expense of the public and our riders. Many times our members end up having to re-do work done by these outside companies. It is frustrating for front line employees and shows a lack of respect for the expertise that our members have.

Local 689 deals with constant complaints about lack of employee morale. In other transit systems in the country and around the world, there is a culture of labor-management cooperation where employees are treated with dignity on the job, their opinions valued, and they have a sense of ownership in the work they do. That is not the WMATA way. Ask long-time employees that have devoted a significant amount of their lives deep underground, fixing the aging tracks of this system in the middle of the night, whether their expertise is frequently solicited by WMATA's management team. Unfortunately, by and large, this invaluable source of institutional knowledge is overlooked or even ignored by management.

Fork in the Road

WMATA's proposed budget going into Fiscal Year 2018 is a major concern for riders and employees alike. The drastic service cuts and fare increases proposed by the agency in response to the impact of SafeTrack are sure to be the death of the system.

Make no mistake, ridership is down, way down. But the best way to restore ridership is not complicated: people need safe, affordable, and reliable transit service. The only way to bring back riders is to restore public confidence in Metro. This will no doubt be a slow process. We have to prove ourselves all over again to a public that has understandably had more than enough of Metro's enormous problems. Asking our rail customers to deal with even longer waits through longer headways and stranding bus riders by eliminating 14 bus lines is not going to restore customer satisfaction. Neither will increasing the minimum rail fare to $2 during off-peak times and $2.25 during peak times. Increasing Metrobus fares by a quarter, to $2 per trip will put a huge hurt on some of our most transit-dependent riders who have no other way to get around.

Laying off 1,000 employees – once again shedding sorely-needed institutional knowledge and putting a huge burden on a shell of a workforce – is not only ill-advised but also dangerous.

Yet, this is WMATA's plan to dig out of the hole.

We know from countless studies across the country that raising fares drastically reduced ridership, having the opposite effect on desired revenue. Moreover, asking people to pay more for less service is a recipe for disaster, especially when you are asking already frustrated WMATA customers.

Like most transit systems that cut routes, WMATA is looking toward those with low ridership -- early morning, late night, and weekend service. People who work non-traditional hours, typically minorities who have no other means of transportation, will be disproportionately affected. The single mom who now gets her kids up at 4:30 a.m. to catch two buses in time to get her children to daycare and then herself to work cannot be expected to stand in the freezing cold with two kids for an additional hour waiting for that transfer bus to arrive. The person who cleans offices downtown in the early hours of the morning should not have to sleep on the cold hard floor in the lobby of the building after finishing his work until the buses start running the next day. Yet, that is exactly what WMATA is proposing here.

Through its slash and burn budget proposal, Metro is using the self-inflicted SafeTrack crisis to justify massive cuts in service that would never be accepted in this region under

normal circumstances. Metro riders need to call them out, letting them know that we need more, not less service.

As bad as circumstances are today, if we go down this road, it is likely that WMATA will never be the same again. People will forever abandon the system, and it will crumble, causing an embarrassing mobility crisis in our nation's Capital.

The answer to Metro's current budget hole is a short-term cash infusion to get the system back on its feet. If Congress had not come to the aid of the American Auto industry during the financial crisis seven years ago with an $80 billion bailout, those companies would have evaporated. Now, America's transit system needs a (much smaller) boost. We call on Congress, Maryland, D.C., and Virginia to come through with the revenues necessary to see Metro through this crisis and urge the agency to work hand and hand with us in an effort to develop a long term dedicated funding stream from the Federal Government and the jurisdictions that will help improve the system and ensure that we never face these dire circumstances ever again. Transit riders and our members deserve nothing less.