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House of Representatives

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Opening Statement of Chairman Gerald E. Connolly Hearing on “WMATA: Getting to a Culture of Excellence” February 9, 2022

This subcommittee has a long record of sustained oversight of the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA). We have found what plagues WMATA is a culture of mediocrity. As the system has jumped from crisis to crisis, this culture of mediocrity has been a common theme – falsified track inspection reports, the failure to document or investigate more than 3,000 criminal complaints from riders, and now a disastrous defect with 60 percent of the system’s railcar fleet that was allowed to languish for four years.

Our hearing today, which I am leading in collaboration with Representative Eleanor Holmes-Norton, will examine urgent safety priorities, structural reforms that advance system accountability, and the long-term challenges facing WMATA and transit systems across the country. **Our goal is to help WMATA leadership and overseers get to a culture of excellence within the system that improves the safety and reliability of Metro.**

First, I want to thank General Manager Paul Wiedefeld for his years of dedicated service to WMATA. Mr. Wiedefeld recently announced that he will retire later this year. Mr. Wiedefeld took over WMATA at a time when all lights were blinking red, and the reality remains that our region has a ways to go to restore confidence in Metro. Mr. Wiedefeld, however, has been willing to make tough decisions, and the improvements he undertook, including the system wide Safetrack project and securing dedicated funding for long term capital investments, are going to help renew our aging transit system. The tough decisions for WMATA are not only in the rearview mirror. They are on the horizon as well. It is imperative that the next General Manger bring transit expertise and a willingness to tackle a stubborn culture of mediocrity. Failure to do so will cause a backslide in the progress Mr. Wiedefeld made.

The federal government has a strong stake in the future health of WMATA, our national capital’s transit backbone. More than one-third of all Metrorail stations are located on federal property serving federal facilities, and during normal operations federal employees represent approximately 40 percent of Metrorail’s peak period customers.

At the height of pandemic-related shutdowns, ridership for Metrorail was down as much as 90 percent and transit budgets around the country were gutted. Congress extended a lifeline to transit in three tranches of funding through the CARES Act, Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act, and the American Rescue Plan. WMATA received more than \$2.4 billion in emergency funding, which allowed the system to close its operating deficit for three consecutive fiscal years.

The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, an historic bipartisan compromise to invest in the future of American competitiveness, will provide WMATA with an additional \$80 to \$100 million in annual capital formula funding over the next five years. The bill also included the Metro Accountability and Investment Act, which I led with the National Capital Region Congressional delegation. The bill reauthorized through 2030 \$150 million in annual dedicated federal capital funding for Metro that must be matched by D.C., Maryland, and Virginia.

Importantly, the funding is conditioned upon WMATA implementing and maintaining critical reforms that strengthen the WMATA Office of Inspector General (OIG). The OIG is an essential institution for enforcing accountability within the system, and I welcome Congressional action to enhance the independence and transparency of the OIG’s work.

Congress also helped create the Washington Metrorail Safety Commission, which is the primary safety oversight body for Metro. The Safety Commission was certified and began operations in 2019 and has helped bring to light lapses in safety training and maintenance efforts, serious problems within the Rail Operations Control Center, and most recently, a series of failed attempts to address a defect with the wheelsets on 7000 series railcars. The Safety Commission also has documented instances in which WMATA has refused to provide it with access to WMATA facilities, networks, and personnel. Congress provided the Safety Commission with sweeping authorities to access the system for the conduct of its safety oversight mission and anything less than total transparency is inconsistent with the letter and spirit of the legislation that established the Commission.

On October 12, 2021, a Metro train derailed in Northern Virginia. The incident is currently under investigation by the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB). The derailment was caused by defective wheelsets on the 7000 series railcars, the system's newest railcars. It was later discovered that WMATA was aware of the problem with the wheelsets since 2017 and has failed to fully address the issues with the railcar manufacturer, Kawasaki. WMATA also failed to disclose to the Safety Commission the defect, which the NTSB has said could have led to a "potentially catastrophic event." Following the derailment, the Safety Commission has ordered the 7000 series railcars out of passenger service twice, both times due to serious oversights in WMATA's remediation efforts.

Failure of WMATA is not an option, and we can no longer afford a pervasive culture of mediocrity. The system will soon start service on the Silver Line to Dulles International Airport – an extension of rail service first envisioned in 1962 which has already given rise to the economic engine of the Commonwealth. Ridership headwinds, however, are projected well into the future with only 75 percent of riders returning to the system by Fiscal Year 2024.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today on how we can work together to create a culture of excellence within the system that will ensure the safety of riders and employees and help meet the profound challenges for transit that lay ahead.

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