

## **Our Leaders Are Failing Metro -- And Us**

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Falling ceilings, crammed trains and higher fares are casting needed attention on Metro, our region's transit system. Much of the blame for these problems has been directed at the transit agency itself, and it should take part of the hit for disappointing performance. But it is our elected officials at the local, state and congressional levels who are truly to blame for Metro's sliding service and escalating fares.

Unlike other major transit systems, Metro has no dedicated revenue source. It is funded by annual appropriations from local and state governments, along with revenue from passenger fares and fees. Compared with other users of public transit, Metro riders already pay an unusually high share of operating costs. And in addition to these costs, Metro faces urgent capital renewal needs for its aging system. Metro has determined that it needs a bare minimum of \$1.5 billion to renew and add capacity in response to increasing bus and rail ridership.

By October, regional governments must agree to commit \$625 million to buy 120 rail cars so that Metro can run eight-car trains by 2006. If our elected officials can't come up with the money, extreme crowding will occur on all of the lines. While our elected officials wait to see what the federal government might put into a deal (they hope the feds will pay for 50 to 65 percent of the total cost), the opportunity to buy these rail cars at a lower price will be lost.

Regional officials found \$2.7 billion for the Woodrow Wilson Bridge and \$800 million for the Springfield interchange; they are proposing \$3 billion for the intercounty connector and \$4.2 billion for the Dulles rail extension. Yet no one is putting money on the table for Metro's \$1.5 billion in needs.

Our region's extensive transit system benefits everyone -- whether or not you use transit. Without our transit system, HOV lanes and traffic management technologies, our region's traffic delays would be up to 50 percent longer, according to the Texas Transportation Institute. Yet we can expect more fare increases, less service and more traffic unless our elected officials hear from the public that Metro must be a top public funding priority.

If elected officials cannot find a way to support our region's critical transit system, our economy will suffer, along with our air quality. Fewer trains and poorer bus service will narrow travel choices and perpetuate the cycle of traffic congestion and environmental degradation. It's time for our elected leaders to step up and support our region's greatest success -- the \$10 billion transit system that has come to symbolize the region even as it has provided superior access for millions of workers, tourists and residents. Next time you are frustrated with late trains, nonexistent buses or high fares, turn to the real source

of the problem. Contact your governor, mayor, council members and congressional representatives to tell them that Metro must be our region's top transportation priority.

**-- Cheryl Cort**

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