

Proposed Green Line Schedule Adjustment General Manager's Written Remarks in lieu of a Presentation Equity Advisory Committee – April 16, 2019

Metro Transit General Manager Wes Kooistra is sharing his remarks in advance of the April 16th Equity Advisory Committee meeting instead of presenting the remarks during the meeting. The request is that members review the remarks beforehand to reserve more meeting time for discussing the proposed schedule adjustment. These remarks are based on the General Manager's statement at the Metropolitan Council Committee of the Whole meeting held on April 3, 2019.

Metro Transit is considering changes to weekday Green Line service that would eliminate service between 2 a.m. and 4 a.m. on weekdays. 24-hour services would remain available on Saturday and Sunday.

This change would make the Green Line schedule similar to our current Blue Line schedule. Blue Line service is not provided between 2 a.m. and 4 a.m. on weekdays except for service between the airport terminals, which are available 24 hours.

Between about 1 a.m. and 4 a.m., Green Line trips operate roughly every hour. As such, this change is expected to eliminate four trips each early weekday morning (two in each direction). This represents a reduction in Green Line service hours of approximately 1.5%.

A change in this amount does not require additional reviews. The threshold for a Title VI review is a 25% change in service. Our contract with our county funders (Ramsey and Hennepin counties) requires us to consult with them if we are planning a service change that is 10% or greater.

Typically, a service change in this amount is administratively implemented as part of our quarterly service evaluation process.

We do understand that even if this is only a 1.5% change in service hours, a move away from 24-hour service requires thoughtful review.

In April, we plan to conduct on-board surveys of riders during these early-morning hours to further evaluate customer service needs. In addition, we will look closer at maintenance, safety and cost factors. Consideration will also be given to options that might be available to mitigate the effects on customers who rely on transit to get to a from work and other destinations during these hours.

We will come back to the Council in May with the additional information we have gathered and reviewed. A final decision will be made near the end of May so service changes can be included in the operator pick for August implementation.

In addition to considering the customer service interests, we will weigh critical rail maintenance demands and other operational factors.

With the Blue Line daily service break, we can complete most of our scheduled and unscheduled rail maintenance during these daily early-morning down times. This clearly allows for safer and more timely rail maintenance operations.

When the Green Line opened five years ago, it was decided to start with a 24-hour service model. When that decision was made, our rail operations raised concerns and these concerns continue to exist.

Our operations maintenance staff continue to request nightly downtime on the Green Line to perform regular and unscheduled rail maintenance because it is safer to perform maintenance when the tracks are not “active” and when there is more time than what is available between trips. Regularly scheduled downtime also assures that rail maintenance is completed on schedule.

Rail maintenance activities include cleaning various components of our tracks, such as clearing traction sand and other debris, cleaning drains, road crossing, interlocks, and mud settlement, repair of fixation bolts, track grinding, and inspections for defect detection.

Also included is snow removal on tracks and platforms, inspections and maintenance of various traction power features such as insulators, switch heaters, and rail access boxes, as well as inspection and maintenance of rail signals, and maintenance of approximately 300-wheel counter sensors located on the rail and in rail access boxes.

These are important maintenance requirements that are difficult to complete in safe and timely manner under the current 24-hour schedule.

Recently I received an e-mail from one rail operations employee who wrote:

“You may not be aware, but there was an incident of an arc flash while a technician was working on the line last year. We asked for windows of time that the line could deenergized to facilitate maintenance, but we were denied. Please be aware you are making things exponentially safer for the people who do this work by simply shutting down the line...We are all going to be safer because of this.”

Rail maintenance on its own warrants consideration of this schedule change.

There are other operational and safety concerns that all factor into this proposed change.

We receive frequent reports from customers, staff, and police of crimes and other conduct issues regularly occurring on the Green Line during these services hours. These conduct issues include assaults, theft, alcohol and drug use, drug dealing, smoking, and with the absence of public restroom facilities, urination and defecation as well as other behaviors that are unacceptable for a transit service.

Today, these violations of our Code of Conduct prevent us from meeting our fundamental commitment to provide a service that is clean, safe and reliable.

While conduct violations occur during other hours of operations, reports indicate that in these early-morning hours these behaviors occur more openly and pervasively. Some riders exhibit dangerous behaviors while there are other riders on board who may be particularly vulnerable to victimization.

I will share some of my own recent experiences that are examples of some of these conduct concerns.

Early in March, I was on the Blue Line and had a conversation with another rider. The conversation began with sharing our enjoyment in the break in weather. During the course of our discussion, the rider shared with me that he often rode Green Line between 2 a.m. and 4 a.m. when, in his words, the Green Line becomes a “party train” where he can get anything he wants.

Within the last month, a rider was found dead on board a Green Line train. Our video showed that the rider injected himself on the train and five stops later became unresponsive. This was at approximately 3:30 a.m.

A few weeks back, I was on an early train. There was dried vomit on one of seats. On another recent morning ride, there was a strong smell of urine in a rail car that I and others occupied. A section of this car was taped off and, as I exited, an officer asked everyone to leave the rail car, so it could be taken out of service for cleaning. In March, more than 50 Green Line cars needed to be taken out of service for cleaning. That’s more than 10 per week.

So I have had some of the same experience as what our customers and police officers have reported. There are unacceptable conduct issues on our light rail lines, and particularly on the Green Line, that we must address in a more effective way than we are today. The status quo is not one of our options.

I have asked Metro Transit Police to have an increased presence on the Green Line, including during these early-morning hours. It is costly and difficult to fill the overtime postings and this effort falls far short of having a sufficient presence to monitor most rail cars.

Additional enforcement and police officer presence also brings its own set of issues. For some, uniformed officer presence represents security and safety. For others, this presence may feel threatening. Perhaps with significantly more resources, we could police our way out of this problem. But for many reasons this is not a good option.

As we evaluate these Green Line service changes, the important consideration is whether the continuation of early-morning service warrants the compromises to the safety and timeliness of rail maintenance and whether it warrants the enforcement requirements, costs and risks necessary to address our significant conduct challenges and rider safety concerns.

We also understand that a change in service hours will disrupt the people who use the Green Line each night for shelter. The most recent count of people who use the Green Line as a destination rather than as a mobility service is between 250 and 300 each night. Based on previous counts and

surveys, approximately one-third to one-half of these individuals have other shelter options but choose to be on the train during these hours instead.

Frankly, part of our challenge is distinguishing who is on the train because it is one of the few public gathering places during that time of night and who is on the train because they have no other options for shelter.

I believe it is fair to say that providing a homeless shelter on our trains is not conducive with providing a responsible public transit service. It is not a good option for transit and it is a terrible option for people who need stable shelter.

Our rail services cannot address the basic care and treatment needs of people who use transit as shelter. We are unequipped to provide even the most fundamental services such as a public restroom, running water or a place to eat. Worse, with our current level of enforcement, we struggle to sufficiently protect vulnerable people from becoming victims of crimes during these hours.

We are challenged in providing a safe environment for our riders, including those who use transit as shelter. Our employees are challenged with biohazard and other cleaning demands when we are unable to provide fundamental personal hygiene facilities.

While we are unable to provide shelter service to people who need this, we are a critical mobility service for all transit dependent people. This includes people who are without shelter. This is an important distinction. Transit cannot itself serve as a destination; it is a mobility service that brings riders from one destination to another. That service is available to anyone who pays a fare and complies with the conduct requirements of our services.

As former Metro Transit Police Chief John Harrington and HRA Manager Jennifer Keogh shared with the Equity Advisory Committee in October 2018, we remain active in finding systemic solutions. We have committed significant resources to assist in connecting people with other shelter options.

This includes the Metro Transit Police Department's Homeless Action Team, HRA staff, funding outreach workers, and 89 housing vouchers dedicated to people who are using transit as shelter. We continue to partner with social service agencies and housing advocates to find resources, share information and better coordinate service access and delivery. And we plan to **stay** active in the pursuit of better shelter options.

This situation is a stark example of a failed social safety net.

Everyone deserves better. Everyone deserves a bed to sleep in at night. The seats in our rail cars are not beds and should never be considered as an acceptable solution to address the significant needs of people without shelter.

To reiterate, in April we plan to survey riders to understand their mobility needs and to further evaluate customer service needs as well as safety, maintenance and cost factors. We will also

consider possible service alternatives to mitigate the effects that this change would have on our customers who rely on transit for mobility.

We will continue to work with other social service agencies in finding alternative shelter options. This activity will be ongoing and expected to continue even if the service change is implemented. In May, we will report back to the Council on the results of our April reviews. We will need to make a final decision by the end of May to meet the August pick deadline.