From: Jonathan Mertzig
To: Mymetrobus; Tishler, Bill; Transportation Commission
Cc: All Alders
Subject: Feedback re: Metro Redesign [Nov 9 hearing]
Date: Thursday, October 27, 2022 10:43:54 PM

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(cc: All Alders)
Dear Members of the Transportation Commission and Alder Tishler,

I am writing to express my deep concern about the current direction of Metro's redesign and bus rapid transit program. While I was originally enthusiastic about the potential of both initiatives, I fear that current budget constraints and deficiencies in process have led to a plan that is severely flawed.

A "ridership" oriented redesign was intended to increase ridership through simplified route structure and a predictable high-frequency network. The end results we are given are overwhelmingly not simple, predictable, or high-frequency. Early on we also heard much about goals of improving the consistency and level of service on evenings and weekends. This is also not in the end results. There is also much reason to be concerned about the course of public engagement and transparency throughout this process.

Complexity in Place of Simplicity

The redesign sought to "untangle" our bus routes, but we are left with a map that still perplexes. It still has many strange loops, indirect routing that strays off continual alignment with main streets, branching lines that split to vastly divergent endpoints, confusing naming conventions mixing letters and numbers, complicated interlining to boost frequencies, and transfer locations now far-flung across the system. Any claims of "simplification" are laughable at best.

A Failure of Frequency

Only a small core set of routes mostly confined to the central isthmus offers "high frequency" of 15 minutes--notably, 15 minutes is often considered the *minimum* for "high frequency" service standards among US transit systems. Even though we gave up coverage for a route structure built with high frequency in mind, large portions of the Metro service area will have frequencies of 30-60 minutes. Riders are asked to make a trade off of a longer walk to stops for no actual gain of frequent service. The lack of actual high frequency in such a network also makes any trip with transfers much less reliable since the wait time for a missed connection will be substantial. This is a complete mismatch of route design and service level--a ridership network that sacrifices coverage must operate at sufficient levels of frequency to justify the increased travel time to stops, or it risks effectively being a service cut.

Decreased Evening and Weekend Service

Early in the redesign process, Metro officials stressed the goal of improving night and weekend service. The lack of sufficient late night and weekend service has long been an impediment to employment in the service industry in Madison, as well as a hindrance to enjoying our city's vibrant nightlife. Unfortunately, this plan fails to deliver, and in fact is a

regression in evening and weekend service.

Even the BRT—which is definitionally supposed to have consistent, predictable scheduling—has service levels below "high frequency" standards on weekends, and many lines appear to have last runs ending earlier than comparable current service levels. Many lines that currently run at 30-minute frequencies have equivalents diminished to 60-minute frequencies. For example, near west side areas served by Route 6 or 7 at 30-minute intervals today will now have 60-minute intervals on the D1.

Failures in Engagement and Communication

While Metro pursued a quite extensive public engagement process, this all occurred during a time of decreased ridership and through electronic means which limited rider awareness and restricted participation to those with the means to use electronic tools. Only a single hybrid meeting was held at the end of the process, well after much of the plan was already heavily revised, limiting the ability for participants to further contribute to refinement of neighborhood-level plans. Last-minute blind-spots like the lack of engagement with the Southdale neighborhood and a sudden awareness of translation shortcomings also seem to indicate some major gaps in the overall engagement strategy. As an advocate I have to suspect there are still constituencies among Metro riders that will be caught largely unaware of these changes and adversely affected by the impacts of the redesign.

For those of us who have been thoroughly engaged, we have found the communication of plans frustratingly incomplete and at times even seemingly deceptive. For example, the baseline for which we are pointed to for comparing the redesign is the 2020 post-COVID cutback network, but shouldn't we really be looking at the full-scale Metro network prior to emergency cutbacks as our basis for full service? It seems like a more honest exercise in planning to use that as the basis for what a full post "bounce-back" system should look like in terms of coverage and operating hours.

Materials about the redesign have also been a moving target as far as being able to track changes and compare to the present state-- obviously, part of this is understandably the nature of a plan in progress--but for example, Metro has presented proposed start/end times and service frequencies in several different format charts over the course of the redesign. It has been difficult to compare over time whether the proposals have been substantially changed from one phase of the design to another. Multiple copies of the route maps have been haphazardly posted across multiple versions of the design site with poor version control, leading to confusion as to the current state of what's actually proposed, even as recently as this week (as of writing this on 10/27/22).

Metro still has not provided a simple overlay of current vs. new route structure for people to have a basic comparison of how new routes align relative to the routes they are currently familiar with, nor have they provided something like a side-by-side listing of existing network route start/end times and frequencies to compare against with the new routes. It seems that an honest and transparent presentation of this proposal should provide a crystal-clear comparison of proposed and current state that does not require citizens and policy makers to dig through schedules past vs. present vs. future to figure out if we're being swindled with a service cut.

I will end this on a personal note: as someone who doesn’t drive due to a progressively

worsening disability, I have been able to prosper thanks to quality transit service. I hoped this plan was going to make my life in Madison even better. Now I'm looking at a longer, more unreliable commute, a tougher time reaching medical care, and greater challenges to enjoy the amenities our city has to offer. I'm privileged enough that I can solve this problem for myself: I'm now starting to look at other cities I can move to that have transit that will serve me well into the future. Unfortunately, most people dependent on Metro service are not as lucky as I am to have that privilege, and this redesign may harm them tremendously.

I urge you to pause this redesign to re-examine these deficiencies and find a sustainable funding model that provides a truly transformative level of improved transit service for the Madison area.

Thank you,
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