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ANC 3/4G Testimony Before the
Committee on Facilities and Procurement
Performance Oversight Hearing on the
Washington Area Transit Authority
February 19, 2020

Chairperson White and members of the Committee on Facilities and Procurement, I am Randy Speck, Chair of ANC 3/4G (Chevy Chase), and I am testifying on behalf of our Commission, which authorized this testimony at its February 10, 2020 meeting by a vote of 6 to 0 (a quorum being 4). The Commission has two particular concerns with the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority's (WMATA's) performance over the past year that are ripe to raise with the Committee in this hearing: (1) WMATA's FY 2021 budget proposal to combine the E6 and M4 bus routes will eliminate seniors' and students' access to important services, will adversely affect our residents, and is indistinguishable from proposals that have been rejected in the past; and (2) the historic bus loop on Connecticut Avenue, NW just south of Chevy Chase Circle should be restored, but WMATA should also make the site available for other uses — e.g., to address the need for

more affordable and moderate-income housing — that can incorporate the existing structure in a mixed-use facility.

The Proposed E6 and M4 Bus Service Reduction

The E6 bus serves a vital function for residents and workers within our ANC. It is particularly important for our seniors who live at the Knollwood Military Lifeplan Community at 6200 Oregon Avenue. Knollwood and other area residents rely on the E6 to get to the Chevy Chase Community Center, the Chevy Chase Public Library, the Avalon Theater, the Safeway grocery store, and to shops and restaurants along the Connecticut Avenue corridor as well as to the Friendship Heights Metro and the nearby shops, restaurants, and doctors' offices. For many of Knollwood's staff, the E6 bus links this far northwest facility to Metro and provides an essential way to get to work. Students and faculty at Lafayette Elementary School also use the E6 bus to and from school. This proposal is not justified, and WMATA should withdraw it.

WMATA's current proposal to eliminate the E6 bus route and extend the M4 route in its place is not new. In response to prior proposals, both the Commission and the community have steadfastly fought to preserve the E6 bus as a vital transportation link for many residents and workers. At its April 25, 2011 meeting, by a unanimous vote, the Commission expressed its "strenuous opposition" to WMATA's proposal to eliminate the E6 bus.¹ The Chevy Chase Citizens Association joined the Commission in a May 13,

¹ WMATA's 2011 proposal was to replace the E6 bus route with an extension of the M4 route — exactly the same as its proposal for the FY 2021 budget. The 2011 proposal did not, however, include the elimination of the M4 route on 30th Place, NW and Military Road, NW.

2011 letter stating that “the proposal to eliminate the E-6 bus line is seriously flawed, and we urge WMATA to reject it.” Councilmember Cheh and then-Councilmember Bowser joined the chorus of protest. In the face of this concerted opposition, WMATA relented and did not implement that proposal.

In September 2013, the District Department of Transportation (DDOT) proposed to curtail service on the E6 in order to reduce the District’s subsidy payments for this route. The Commission again voted unanimously at its September 23, 2013 meeting to request that DDOT “maintain current E-6 bus service levels and consider the re-establishment of weekend service.” At the Commission’s February 8, 2016 meeting, it asked WMATA to “expand service on the E6 bus route,” emphasizing the District’s

overall strategic effort to provide a “livable” environment and its specific commitments to provide “safe and affordable modes of . . . public transportation” for the District’s senior residents. If the District is to be truly livable and age-friendly, it must look beyond a simplistic cost analysis and assure its tax-paying residents have those transportation services that are essential to our urban quality of life.

In apparent disregard for this history, on January 16, 2020, WMATA’s Board authorized public hearings to be held on its FY 2021 Budget, which includes combining the E6 and M4 bus routes.² The offered justification for this change is “efficiency,” and the change is subject to a public hearing that is scheduled for February 26, 2020. Under WMATA’s plan, residents along Western Avenue, NW, Chestnut Street, NW, Oregon Av-

² Authorization of Public Hearing on Proposed FY 2021 Capital Budget, Operating Budget, and Fare Service Changes, January 16, 2020, Attachment C at pages 8-9, available at <http://bit.ly/2GGDPL1>.

enue, NW, and at Knollwood would no longer have direct bus access to Lafayette Elementary School, the government facilities and businesses along Connecticut Avenue, or the businesses, doctor's offices, and the Metro stop at Friendship Heights. WMATA would also eliminate all of its current M4 bus stops on 30th Place, NW and Military Road, NW. As noted, the community "strenuously opposed" WMATA's almost identical proposal in 2011,³ and, consequently, it was not implemented. WMATA has offered no new information suggesting that residents' need for the E6 has diminished.

The ANC again rejects the elimination of service that would occur with the proposed combination of the E6 and M4 routes. Knollwood residents have advised the Commission that they strongly oppose this change, which would make it much more difficult for its senior residents to access essential services and vital social engagement activities. In a short, two-day poll of Knollwood's 190 independent living residents, 36 responded, and of those, 29 reported that they use the E6 bus at least one day a week. Their typical destinations were to Connecticut Avenue, NW and McKinley Street, NW (23 respondents go to the bank, drug store, grocery store, Chevy Chase Public Library, Chevy Chase Community Center, the U.S. Post Office, or other) and to Friendship Heights (31 respondents go to Metro, connecting buses, stores, restaurants, and to medical appointments). If WMATA's proposal were implemented, half of the respondents said they would

³ See "Chevy Chase residents oppose proposed Metrobus cuts," Greater Greater Washington, May 22, 2011, available at <http://bit.ly/2taYcNd>. At the hearing, Councilmembers "Cheh, Bowser, and others testified that the E6 serves upper Connecticut Avenue and Friendship Heights, both important commercial and medical destinations for seniors. They argued that cutting the E6 would hurt local businesses and burden seniors trying to reach doctors' offices."

have to transfer to the E4 to go to the destinations previously served by the E6. Residents also indicated a desire for weekend service. Other seniors who are aging in place along the E6 route tell the Commission that they rely on it as well. Finally, 36 of Knollwood's 198 staff members reported that they use the E6 bus, which would be even more useful if weekend service were available.

Under WMATA's proposal, young students in Barnaby Woods, Hawthorne, and parts of Chevy Chase DC would lose bus access to Lafayette Elementary School. Some parents reported that they ride the E6 with their children to Lafayette in the morning and then continue by bus to the Friendship Heights Metro. This would no longer be possible if the E6 were combined with the M4, as WMATA proposes. The principal at Lafayette Elementary also reports that about 15% of the school's staff use the E6 bus daily and stated, "We would definitely feel the E6 if it were missing."

Moreover, because of the proposed elimination of a portion of the M4 route, senior residents at the Ingleside Continuing Care Retirement Community on Military Road, NW, would no longer be able to get to Tenleytown on the bus without walking several blocks to Nebraska Avenue, NW. Some residents have also noted that the M4 is already heavily used during the morning rush hour by students at Deal Middle School and Wilson High School, including students who live on the portion of the M4 route that WMATA proposes to eliminate. This heavy ridership would be exacerbated if it were combined with the E6 riders. The M4 bus is also subject to significant rush hour delays because of backed

up traffic at Nebraska Avenue, NW and Connecticut Avenue, NW, which makes it less reliable as a substitute for the E6.

The M4 stop at 30th Place and Military Road is also provides an important transit option for Temple Sinai, located at 3100 Military Road, NW. Temple Sinai's Executive Director advised the Commission that two staff members regularly use this M4 bus stop.

Our Temple Sinai Nursery School also uses that bus stop in front of the temple for trips to points of interest around DC with our nursery school children. In addition, for nursery school faculty and staff recruitment overall, it is a significant benefit to be easily accessible to a public transportation/bus route. The loss of this bus stop may have a negative impact on the ability of Temple Sinai to recruit and retain staff for a variety of positions ranging from nursery school teachers, to custodial and administrative staff as needed to support for the over 1200 area resident families who are members of our temple community.

As the ANC has pointed out before, WMATA's proposed changes are inconsistent with the District's Age-Friendly DC commitment to promoting "safer, timely and affordable modes of private and public transportation" for our seniors.⁴ It may also cause greater use of cars to transport young residents to and from school, exacerbating congestion around Lafayette. These routes do require subsidies from the District to ensure that we meet residents' transportation needs,⁵ but there appear to be ample reasons to justify this expense and to oppose this proposed change. Dedicated bus lanes and limited-stop buses often receive deserved attention, but local buses that serve an important segment of

⁴ See One-page Summary of Age-Friendly DC, 2018, available at <http://bit.ly/37OMVBw>.

⁵ WMATA stated on January 30, 2020, that the decrease in the E6 subsidy from its proposal was \$197,000, but it later reduced that decrease in subsidy by more than half, to \$94,063. It has not yet responded to the ANC's request to explain this change.

the population — like the E6 — must continue to be an essential part of the District’s multi-modal transportation system.

WMATA initially agreed to explain its proposal and to answer questions at ANC 3/4G’s February 24, 2020 meeting, but on February 3, 2020, it advised all ANCs that “due to the large number of requests and very limited staff resources we are unable to attend individual ANC meetings.” Instead, it held an “ANC Forum for Commissioners” on February 11 2020.⁶ Such a forum format is an inadequate substitute, however, for a presentation at a public venue where residents and bus patrons — not just commissioners — can hear directly from WMATA and ask their questions.

WMATA should not have made this proposal without first consulting with our ANC and hearing from residents who depend on the E6. At a minimum, before proceeding with any aspect of this plan, WMATA should explore a DDOT proposal presented to

⁶ Subsequent to the Commission’s adoption of this testimony, the Commission participated in WMATA’s February 11, 2020 ANC Forum. At that meeting, WMATA indicated that 82% of WMATA’s bus revenue comes from subsidies paid by the District, Maryland, and Virginia. WMATA explained that the need for subsidies will be even greater in FY 2021 because WMATA projects a 21.6% drop in revenue from FY2020 to FY2021 “due primarily to the decline in full fare riders, increased fare evasion, customers taking advantage of new pass products, and an increase in transfer credit to \$2.00 when transferring from rail to bus.” In other words, WMATA needs more subsidies from the three jurisdictions because of its decisions to cut fares and increased fare evasion.

the Commission in March 2019, for “micro-transit” as a possible way to curtail the E6 bus route while continuing to provide an equivalent — or even superior — service.⁷

Finally, with respect to the E6 bus, we appreciate WMATA’s efforts to reroute the bus around the ongoing Oregon Avenue reconstruction project. When the ANC and residents objected to the initial rerouting on Tennyson Street, WMATA adjusted the route to other streets. The Oregon Avenue project will continue until at least the end of 2021. We urge WMATA to continue consulting with DDOT, the ANC, and the community before adjusting the route as traffic on Oregon Avenue is disrupted during construction.

The Chevy Chase Bus Turnaround

At its January 27, 2014 meeting, ANC 3/4G expressed concern to WMATA about the deteriorated condition of the bus loop building⁸ at 5720 Connecticut Avenue, NW, and advised WMATA of the ANC’s interest in finding an adapted use for this building at the prominent Chevy Chase Gateway entering the District.⁹ The Commission — often joined by the Chevy Chase Citizens Association and Historic Chevy Chase DC — has revisited these two concerns repeatedly over the intervening six years.

⁷ See ANC 3/4G’s March 25, 2019 meeting minutes at <http://bit.ly/2GWqYod>. The Office of Planning’s proposed amendments to the Comprehensive Plan’s also emphasize the need to “supplement basic public transit services with shuttle and minibuses to provide service for transit-dependent groups, including older adults, people with disabilities, school age children, and residents in areas that cannot viably be served by conventional buses” (Transportation Element, Section 412.5, page 41, available at <http://bit.ly/31AOfW5>). WMATA may not, however, deprive those citizens of bus service without first putting such supplemental services in place.

⁸ Various called a “bus loop,” “bus turnaround,” or “bus depot,” the building is used by WMATA as a turnaround for buses on Connecticut Avenue and as a restroom facility for bus drivers. The restroom in the building has been closed and unusable, however, for many years.

⁹ See ANC 3/4G’s January 27, 2014 meeting minutes at <http://bit.ly/31ms1ab>.

For all of this time, the bus depot has been an eyesore and a severely underutilized site. Though it has not been formally designated historic, WMATA and the community agree that the building has historic significance and should be restored. At the Commission's November 25, 2019 meeting, WMATA advised that it has a contract for designing the restored building, and expects construction to begin in July 2020, and end in December 2020.¹⁰ Again, the Commission asked WMATA "to continue communicating with the ANC about potential other uses for the property in addition to its use as a bus loop." WMATA indicated that it had no plans for any other use of the site than as a bus loop.

ANC 3/4G adopted a resolution on February 10, 2020, asking the Office of Planning to designate the Connecticut Avenue corridor from Chevy Chase Circle to Livingston Street, NW — including the bus loop — as the Chevy Chase Gateway. It also asked OP to develop a Small Area Plan that would "guide long-range development, improve our neighborhood, achieve citywide goals, and attain economic and community benefits." The Small Area Plan should include development of mixed-income residences with particular provision for affordable and moderate-income housing. The bus loop should be a prime location for housing above the restored historic building. The current single-use of this space is inefficient, uneconomic, and cannot be justified, particularly in light of the District's goal to add affordable housing throughout the District. This site is a prime location for just such an improvement. We urge WMATA to help make better use

¹⁰ See ANC 3/4G's November 25, 2019 meeting minutes at <http://bit.ly/2S7TA2M>.

of the bus loop site so that it will be integrated into a mixed-use building to better benefit the community and the District.

Thank you.