

# Washington, DC Metro faces funding shortfall

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The Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) reported last week that its current operating budget has fallen short of expected revenues by \$74 million. The funding deficit is a result of the District failing to provide a standard quarterly payment to the Metro system because of the federal government shutdown.

Washington, D.C.'s spending is directly tied to budget appropriations made by Congress. In the absence of any provisions for the new fiscal year, the city's finances are virtually at a standstill. The \$74 million figure is a single piece of the \$274 million annually provided by the District, a component of a broader revenue base that includes money spent on tickets, federal grants, and additional subsidies from Maryland and Virginia.

The District has only preserved the Metro and passed through the first week of the shutdown intact by drawing upon an emergency reserve fund that had been appropriated in advance, and by designating every city employee "essential" to its operations. Without clearance from Congress or an end to the shutdown, there is a distinct possibility that every public agency and department within D.C. will quickly be brought to a halt.

Metro spokesmen have stated that the funding shortfall does not constitute any immediate threat to rail services, but added that they are "closely monitoring" the situation as it develops. In other words, as the government shutdown continues to persist, the public transit system's ability to function will be placed in jeopardy.

In addition to this, due to the continued furlough of thousands of D.C. workers, the WMATA has experienced a drop in ridership of more than 20 percent, forcing it to decrease its total railcar usage per

train from eight to six.

The announcement of funding concerns comes on the heels of the death of a 41-year-old maintenance worker last weekend. The worker had been performing routine repairs along the Red Line route when a large explosion launched a 40-foot section of iron railing into the air. The cause of the accident still remains to be determined, and official probes have been delayed due to safety inspectors at the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) being out on furlough and therefore unavailable.

House Republicans led by Darrell Issa of California have made attempts to de-link District funding from the federal budget, passing a bill that would grant "budget autonomy" to Washington, D.C., as an initiative to provide financial relief to certain favored sectors of the government.

Senate Democrats have refused to schedule a vote on such legislation, however, in line with White House opposition against any "piecemeal" funding plans coming from the Republicans.

The elaborate political theater being conducted at the federal level has created some friction between key Democratic leaders and local District politicians. D.C. mayor Vincent Gray, a Democrat, publicly confronted Senate majority leader Harry Reid at a press conference this week in order to demand support for the bill, while the District's congressional delegate, Eleanor Holmes Norton, had a similar "heart-to-heart" conversation with Obama.

Far from representing partisan "gridlock," the shutdown is a concerted effort by politicians of both parties to extract enormous concessions from the working class, while painting the other party as responsible for any negative effects. This is especially true in the case of Washington, D.C., where the

shutdown is causing all public spending to be brought to a halt.

Even before this month's events, the WMATA had already been discussing implementing fare increases for 2014. Spokesmen for the agency are now saying that these increases may be greater than initially considered, depending upon the amount of revenue loss sustained during the shutdown period.

Raising ticket prices will disproportionately affect District workers who rely on public transportation to get to their jobs, and the scale of the losses being incurred by the WMATA makes it likely that fare increases will be substantial. One estimate reports that the drop in rider volume carries losses of up to several hundred thousand dollars per day.

The erosion of public infrastructure, mass underutilization of civil employees and the failure to act upon and enforce regulatory standards, as well as serious disregard for the basic health and safety of workers, are another testament to the real priorities of those in power. A 2013 report released earlier this year by the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) assigned a grade of D+ to the overall status of public infrastructure and transportation projects in the United States and estimated that \$3.6 trillion would be required to successfully update systems by 2020. Of course, it is unlikely that even a fraction of this sum will be forthcoming.



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