

National Transportation Safety Board expanding investigation of DC Metro

Joe Williams
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In the wake of the January 12 Washington, DC Metro disaster, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), the agency overseeing the federal investigation of the event, recommended that all ventilation systems nationally be evaluated and, if necessary, repaired, as soon as possible.

The catastrophe occurred when a train became stuck on the tracks in a smoke-filled tunnel, resulting in one commuter dying from smoke inhalation and injuring dozens of others. The NTSB took the unusual step of recommending that the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) make immediate changes in its safety protocol, although it has yet to finish its investigation of the January incident.

The decision to expand the recommendation for a safety overhaul to the national level indicates that January's accident was most likely not an isolated incident resulting from a lax attitude toward safety at the DC Metro. More likely, it was the result of drastic budget cuts that have been inflicted on transit systems across the country. The American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) estimates that America's infrastructure receives just over half of the \$3.6 billion it requires.

The board is asking the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) to complete a four-part audit that would assess the state of repair of exhaust systems, written procedures for handling emergencies, training programs, and compliance with industry best practices at every subway system. The American Public Transportation Association, a national advocacy group for public transportation enterprises, will be given the role of educating its members about the dangers of inadequate safety procedures, and to pressure them to engage in regular training exercises.

In 2013, ASCE issued its "Report Card for

America's Infrastructure," in which the country's transit systems received a "grade" of D. It found that repairs and investments totaling \$78 billion would be needed to bring America's transit systems up to a state of good repair. Furthermore, transit companies keep very poor records of rail maintenance and safety, and some keep no such records at all. Nationally, transit systems receive about \$25 billion less than they need to operate safely, constituting an investment gap of 40 percent, which is expected to grow to 55 percent by 2040.

The report also identified inadequate public transportation systems as a major factor limiting employment opportunities, particularly in large metropolitan areas, where 90 percent of residents have access to transit services, but are only able to reach 40 percent of the jobs in their area within a reasonable commuting period of 90 minutes. While those with access to public transportation have increased their ridership by 9.1 percent over the last decade, the number of people with access has declined to only 55 percent.

In assessing the emergency response of the DC Metro to the January 12 event, the NTSB's preliminary findings indicate that exhaust fans designed to clear smoke from the tunnel were activated in reverse, holding the smoke in place directly above the passengers. Documents obtained by the *Washington Post* revealed that WMATA has known for at least a year that its exhaust system is outdated, but plans to purchase a new computer system to pinpoint sources of smoke and coordinate fan activity were never acted on in any significant way.

In addition, an alarm system designed to alert officials to failures in equipment designed to amplify the signal strength of fire and police radios has never

been properly activated. The \$2 million system was installed in 2006, but when Metro officials tried to activate it in 2007, they found it did not produce reliable results and was difficult to maintain. When first responders arrived on the scene of the January 12 accident, their radio signals were so weak that they had to resort to using cell phones to communicate. Fire officials argue that had the alarm system been functioning, they could have been prepared to respond properly.

The DC Metro is facing a budget shortfall of over \$100 million, largely due to the refusal of local governments to pay for any of the projected increase in operating expenses, which are anticipated to grow from \$1.75 billion in 2015 to \$1.86 billion in 2016. Furthermore, federal employees saw a reduction in transit benefits from \$245 to \$130 a month, resulting in an average loss of 6,000 fares per day. WMATA recently rejected an attempt to make up for the shortfall by raising fares and reducing services after an intense public backlash. Such an action would have violated its own policy of not raising prices in consecutive years.

In addition to those fare hikes, riders were subjected to a number of service reductions and disruptions last year. Many of the disruptions were caused by smoke and fire incidents like the one that caused January's fatality. Cracked rails also caused delays, including one on the Red Line so severe that angry tweets and photos of crowded, chaotic platforms went viral. Over the summer, WMATA announced major reductions of Blue Line service in order to move two of its trains to the Silver Line, which also provoked angry responses from wide swaths of the ridership.

Rather than allocating the funds necessary to repair the infrastructure, the DC political establishment appears poised to use such tragedies to shift the discussion toward a more preferable subject: justifying attacks on the living standards of transit workers.

On the February 13 broadcast of NPR's "The Kojo Nnamdi Show," DC City Council Chair Phil Mendelson downplayed the role of budget cuts, arguing that "inefficiency" at WMATA was to blame. He reacted positively when co-panelist Tom Sherwood suggested that the solution for WMATA's woes was "a Michelle Rhee-type makeover," referring to the divisive and controversial former DC public schools chancellor, who was appointed by then-mayor Adrian

Fenty for the specific purpose of breaking teachers unions and privatizing the school system. Mendelson, a Democrat, said, "I think they've grown fat and happy," in reference to the region's transit workers.

The transit workers are represented by Amalgamated Transit Union 689. While speaking to Congress on the January 12 incident, ATU Local 689 President Jackie Jeter did not defend workers' wages or living standards, nor did she demand an end to the budget cuts that preceded WMATA's safety problems. Instead, she spoke of the need for WMATA to instill a "culture of safety" in workers.

Other plans to exploit the accident were revealed in a February 19 article in the *Washington Post*, which is also a registered member of the Greater Washington Board of Trade.

The *Post* article focuses on the response to the accident, framing the incident as a "national security" issue. "The Yellow Line accident on Jan. 12 is the latest example of the Washington region's continuing struggles with emergency response, despite spending nearly \$1 billion in federal homeland security grants since the September 11 attacks in order to be nimble in a crisis," the *Post* states.

For its part, WMATA says it has been working since 2012 to install a system of "command posts" to coordinate "emergency response" in its tunnels.



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