Washington DC forced to suspend all metro service due to electrical fires

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Officials from the Washington DC Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) took the drastic step of suspending service on all metro lines Wednesday and Thursday morning after an electrical fire occurred earlier in the week, causing metro services to switch to single-tracking.

The fire was reportedly caused by a frayed jumper cable, a malfunction similar to that which resulted in the death of a commuter and the hospitalization of dozens of others last year.

The shutdown and emergency inspection of the country's second largest public transit system's more than 100 miles of track revealed at least 26 instances of frayed or failing wiring, including several "showstoppers" which would require immediate maintenance, stated Metro General Manager Paul J. Wiedefeld. In announcing the closure, Wiedefeld declared "This is what a safety culture looks like."

The Washington DC metro system has been plagued by crisis in recent years. In addition to the January 2015 electrical fire which caused a train tunnel to fill up with smoke, asphyxiating one passenger and hospitalizing others, a collision between two trains on the Red Line in 2009 resulted in the deaths of nine people, and multiple injuries.

Recent months have seen derailments, tracks losing power and other calamities which have persuaded many to stay away from the system. In October the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) assumed authority over the metro's safety operations.

The Wednesday shutdown did not occur while businesses were closed, as was the case nearly two months ago when a record-setting blizzard passed through the region, causing Metro officials to suspend services. Rather, the Wednesday commute saw massive traffic jams along the region's already-overcrowded roadways.

Government workers and others were permitted to work from home or given the day off, while private sector, working class commuters, who could not afford to miss work or telecommute, were forced to spend additional hours on public bus routes in order to reach their destination. As a result of the disarray, Washington DC public schools announced that all student absences would be excused and several charter schools opted to close for the day.

Directly connecting the haphazard response of metro officials to fears of another deadly accident waiting to occur in the metro's tunnels, Wiedefeld said "Fourteen months ago, we had a tragedy on this system. And [Monday], we had conditions that replicated that tragedy. And for me to not do something about it immediately—that's not something I could live with." WMATA's previous manager, Richard Sarles, resigned in the wake of the 2015 tragedy.

Established in 1967, WMATA was at one time dubbed the "Great Society Subway" after the raft of social legislation initiated by Democratic President Lyndon B. Johnson. Like many of the social programs enacted during this period, the transportation system has since suffered endless cutbacks and defunding.

According to data provided by the FTA, US public transit currently receives less than 60 percent of the required funding for operations. WMATA has been forced to continuously raise fares and cut services substantially due to lack of funds.

The American Society of Civil Engineers released a 2013 study that found American infrastructure—from bridges, roads, to buildings—to be near structural failure, or a "D" level.

"I hope this is a wake-up call for the entire region—for the District, for Virginia, for Maryland and the federal

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government—that we need to invest in our system once and for all," stated WMATA board chair Jack Evans. "I recognize … that the worst time to ask for more money, or more support, is when you're doing poorly. [But] the region has to do its part to support Metro," Evans pleaded.

In response to the complaints of a lack in funding, Secretary of Transportation Anthony Foxx declared that a lack of funding was "not the issue." Rather, Foxx declared "I think that the point is that I don't think it is just resources. I think it is culture and I think it is a deliberate decision that is needed from everyone involved in this to focus relentlessly on safety." The argument for a "culture of safety" inevitably becomes a front for foisting responsibility for the decrepit state of the transit system onto the backs of workers.

The "safety culture" argument was also echoed in comments by Wiedefeld to the *Washington Post*. "I have repeatedly said this to every line employee …: 'You are the person that touches the customer directly. If you have an issue—and I mean that from both a safety perspective and from a management perspective—you have to raise that issue with management,'" Wiedefeld said, before ending his comments by warning, "The people who work directly for me will understand that, or they will not be here. It's fairly simple."

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