

Unprecedented shutdown of Baltimore Metro system due to hazardous track conditions

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The Maryland Transit Authority (MTA) announced earlier this month the closure of the entire Baltimore Metro SubwayLink for emergency repairs until March 11. Transit officials had been holding out for a scheduled August 2018 closure that would see major track replacements, but were made aware that 17 of 19 previously known worn segments of track had now reached “black condition” exposing the metro’s 40,000 daily passengers to imminent derailment if service continued.

In an interview with the *Washington Post*, Rob Puentes, a rail safety and transportation expert at the Eno Center for Transportation, called the sudden month-long shutdown of an entire major urban metro system “unprecedented” in US history. “It’s the whole system and for a long time,” Puentes said. “There’s nothing like it in the country.”

On Friday, February 9, MTA chief executive Kevin Quinn announced a temporary shutdown that would go through the weekend in order to investigate reports of extreme wear on 19 segments, including 11 curves in the metro track’s 15.5-mile run. On Sunday, February 11, the MTA announced a shutdown of service for one month ending on March 11.

Riders were blindsided by the last-minute announcement, leaving many stranded waiting for a way to get to work. One Johns Hopkins Hospital worker, Edward Marshall, told a *Baltimore Sun* reporter, “This is a real inconvenience. You got hardworking people trying to get back and forth to work. I’ve been here 30 minutes waiting for a bus, and every bus that came is packed.”

The current repair work is mainly rail replacements; 33,000 feet of new rail above ground in addition to 6,000 feet to be installed in curves within tunnels, according to the MTA. These repairs along with the

still planned shutdown in August are estimated to cost the city \$20 million. On February 12, Governor Larry Hogan announced \$2.2 million would be used to run shuttle buses and connect Metro passengers with existing county and city bus routes and stations.

At the time of the announcement Quinn said he was presented with a report that left him “no option” but to shut down the entire subway. At the same time, according to the *Washington Post*, Quinn assured reporters that the MTA was aware of wear levels and that the decision for the closure was “out of a pure abundance of caution.”

A report from January of this year, carried out by an outside firm, alerted MTA officials to previously unanticipated levels of wear on the tracks, particularly the curves. The inspection that led to the announced emergency shutdown on February 11 followed up on the January report.

However, an earlier 23-day partial closure in 2016 revealed 17 parts of the track were in clear violation of MTA safety standards. Yet instead of scheduling emergency maintenance on those segments, the MTA opted to continue to run the metro until the scheduled summer 2018 repairs. Quinn, quoted in the *Baltimore Sun*, stated, “We made an engineering decision that the tracks were still safe to operate on. ... Our riders were never in any danger.”

“It just so happened that this physical inspection was the one that really revealed that the track simply would not last another six months for us as originally anticipated,” Quinn told the *Sun*, adding, “Safety is our complete priority, and we are not going to take any risks with our passengers.”

Quinn’s feigned concern notwithstanding, the shutdown has attracted wide criticism from public transit and rail safety experts across the country. Keith

Millhouse, a public transit consultant who oversaw the implementation of new safety standards at the California MetroLink after a deadly rail accident claimed 25 lives, told a *Sun* reporter, “To wait a year is inexcusable and shows a tremendous amount of disrespect for the value of your customers’ time and, more importantly, your customers’ safety. ... It’s absolutely unforgivable, and heads should roll. ... Whoever makes the appointments to these agencies should rethink whether these people are doing a correct and proper job.”

In the same article the *Sun* interviewed an airport and railroad engineering expert, Gus Ubaldi of Robson Forensic, who questioned how the wear could have crept up on the MTA if they had been keeping up regular inspection as they claimed. “In all these years beforehand, you can start seeing what’s happening to your rail,” he said. “You can see if, over the last five years, the angle has been increasing by such-and-such. ... It doesn’t happen overnight.”

While the Baltimore Metro consists of only a single line a significant number of workers rely on the service. The system was originally conceived as part of a mass transit development plan put together by city officials in the mid-1960s. It called for six lines running through the city and into surrounding counties.

The plan was reduced to two lines in the 1970s, to serve northwestern and southeastern sections of the city and surrounding counties. However, financial limitations and push back from upper middle-class sections of suburban elites kept the south line, which would have connected downtown to the BWI airport and Anne Arundel County, out of the final plan.

In the end, one line was built, in three phases, between 1983 and 1995, with 14 stops connecting parts of northwest Baltimore County to the city’s core, ending underneath Johns Hopkins Hospital at a total cost of \$1.4 billion. Eighty percent was funded through federal mass transit grants and 20 percent from the state of Maryland. At the time it was the state’s largest public works project.

The month-long closure of a major urban area metro system happens within the context of the Trump administration’s recent budget 2019 proposals. Under Trump’s plan, funding for the Department of Transportation would be cut by \$3.4 billion. One program targeted for elimination is the TIGER grant

program which funds a variety of road, rail and transit efforts.

Other US cities are also struggling with decaying infrastructure on public transportation systems including nearby Washington D.C., where the Washington Metro and Transit Authority (WMATA) has been plagued by train derailments and other accidents, including a January 2015 incident in which smoke filled a tunnel in downtown Washington D.C., leading to the death by asphyxiation of one commuter and the hospitalization of others. Most recently a derailment occurred in the D.C. Metro on January 15 and, last week, D.C. Metro officials announced that two stops on the commuter-heavy Red Line will be closed for 45 days due to needed repairs.



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