

After seeking to bring back defective railcars, Washington D.C. transit system reverses course again after more defects emerge

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On December 23, the Washington metropolitan Transit Authority (WMATA) announced a pause in the return of several hundred railcars to passenger service. The move came after the revelation of persistent defects in the vehicles' wheelbases which heightens the potential for derailment.

WMATA was ordered to pull the 7000-series railcars on October 17 due to three derailments which occurred days before, including one cited as potentially "catastrophic" by the National Transportation Safety Board. The derailment left 200 stranded passengers outside of its Arlington Cemetery Station. The reason was defective wheel axles.

The *Washington Post* reported that the transit system, popularly known as metro, knew about these problems as far back as 2017 but hadn't reported them. WMATA has received a total of \$768 million dollars for the fiscal years of 2020 and 2021 from the Coronavirus, Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. Despite these considerable sums, the transit system has continued to put off necessary maintenance and safety measures.

In mid-December, WMATA announced a "metered release" of roughly half of the system's 7000-series railcars back to service. According to WMATA general manager Paul J. Wiedefeld at the time, this partial restoration of the cars "will allow [metro] to improve reliability" while it lays out "a more definitive service plan after the first of the year."

The basis for the cars' supposed return was that metro had supposedly enacted a plan to ramp up inspections of the problematic cars from every 90 days to every eight days. This plan had been floated in early November but was finally accepted by the transit

oversight agency only in mid-December.

This decision itself contradicted a late November statement made by Wiedefeld, in which he declared, "it's not going to be something that, come January 1 or whatever date, that we can say, 'Okay, well, the 7000s are back.'"

However, no less than nine days after announcing the return of 42 of the system's 748 7000-series cars, the Washington Metrorail Safety Commission (WMSC) reordered their removal, with spokesperson Max Smith citing "minuscule movements" in several wheelbases which "metro failed to take action" to cite or resolve upon inspection.

The WMSC instead ordered an overhaul of the transit system's return-to-service plan. The *Post* quoted Smith saying, "We caught this" and "the idea behind the plan is that metro should be implementing it so there's nothing to catch." The overhaul plan is being ordered to include "additional projections and internal oversight" to prevent cars that fail safety inspections to be returned to service.

WMATA general manager Wiedefeld, in an effort to save face, stated that there are "no new issues of concern" in metro's series of zig zags.

The transit system was met with frustrated responses on Twitter, where it had announced the cars' suspension from service. Riders called for the system to be "closed down for a rebuild" and "the entire mgmt team should be fired and a competent team brought in," as it had "failed on EVERY level."

The inability of WMATA to follow its own safety plan and, in hurried form, return cars to service, speaks to the desperation of the economic interests driving the reopening of the region. Last month the *Post* editorial

board published comments calling for a “culture change at metro.” Without this, the newspaper proclaimed, “the city’s booming pre-covid economy... will continue to limp along.”

As of October, rail ridership averaged 185,000 entries on weekdays, 148,000 on Saturday and 101,000 on Sunday. This represents 27 percent of the system’s weekday ridership and 50 percent on weekends during pre-pandemic times.

The suspension comes in the midst of a surge of COVID-19 cases in Washington D.C. following the emergence of the Omicron variant. According to the *Post*, the city has the highest case rate per capita in the country. As of January 2, the seven-day average for positive coronavirus cases has been 369, a significant increase from a low of 15 at the beginning of December.

The potential for such a surge to happen was increased by the ending of the mask mandate by Washington D.C.’s Democratic Mayor Muriel Bowser in late November. Last week, NPR published comments from public health professor Neil Seghal stating, “DC dropped its mask policy at very much the wrong time, just before Thanksgiving when we’d expect an increase in transmission without Omicron looming.”



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