

Washington D.C. transit system crisis deepens as officials report no quick fix for defective railcars

Leon Gutierrez, Nick Barrickman
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On March 24, the Washington Metropolitan Transit Authority (WMATA) board held a hearing that concluded that the transit agency still has “no near-term solution” for the defect impacting most the rail system’s train cars.

WMATA general manager Paul J. Wiedefeld was quoted by the *Washington Post* saying, “As the cause appears to be a combination of factors, I do not expect a near-term solution.” This meant that railcar service reduction would last for the DC region through the summer.

WMATA pulled its entire 7000-series railcars on October 17 last year after a series of dangerous derailments happened. The recall impacted 60 percent of its 1,300-railcar fleet. The cause was defective axles along the wheelbases which widened gradually over time.

According to the *Post*, “the suspension of Metro’s most advanced and previously most reliable cars has challenged the agency at a time when ridership and revenue continue to suffer from the prevalence of telework.” The *Post* editorial board weighed in Tuesday with a statement expressing concern over the economic prospects of the region with Metro’s continued mishaps. The statement declared “Metro’s prospects are bleak.”

The statement continues: “Ridership is climbing but is still down by two-thirds from pre-pandemic levels. Subway operating revenue, driven largely by passenger fares, was more than \$530 million in the fiscal year before the pandemic; in the current year, it will not reach \$100 million.” The *Post* added, “no strong recovery in that income stream is likely until federal workers return to their offices, the prospects of which

remain uncertain.”

The current lack of rail cars comes against the backdrop of a transit system which has been plagued by crises. The system has encountered increasingly hazardous situations on its transit routes as defective equipment, overworked and improperly trained personnel have impacted services.

The most serious episodes in recent years include a 2009 collision that left eight dead and 80 injured. Another involved an electrical fire on the Yellow Line in downtown Washington D.C. in 2015 that resulted in the asphyxiation death of a passenger.

The continuing safety issues have crippled services, leading to a catastrophic drop in ridership that the pandemic has only deepened.

Metro leadership’s response to the crisis has been a mixture of pragmatic quick-fixes and deception. In December, the Washington Metrorail Safety Commission (WMSC) re-ordered the 7000-series’ complete removal after a brief nine-day period in which the WMATA had promised to monitor the wheelbase for any impending defects.

WMSC spokesperson Max Smith told the *Post* at the time that “metro failed to take action,” despite the detection of “minuscule movements” along the wheelbases.

WMATA officials continue to attempt to push for the return of unsafe railcars to service despite the problems. At the Metro board hearing last month, Metro chair Paul Smedburg told the WMSC’s Smith that the system “cannot wait until the end of these safety processes and protocols to get approvals” for railcars to return. Instead, Smedburg demanded “timely decisions to be made as we go, or this will continue to drag on.”

Smith countered by alleging “[Metro] has not submitted a 7000 series return-to-service plan to us as required by and described in our order.” The safety agency spokesperson added that the WMSC was working “to make sure that they’re sharing information with us and that we can provide any feedback as soon as we can.”

The rush to return to full-capacity operation comes as efforts are being made to drop all COVID-19-related protections in the transit system. At the hearing, general manager Wiedefeld expressed no concerns about overcrowding. “I’ve been using the system...it’s not where it was pre-COVID ... but it’s gotten me around very well,” and “I just think the system is a very good system, even at a reduced level,” he said.

The transit agency still aims to gradually return the 7000-series rail cars through the summer. Metro will bring back more of their older 6000-series rail cars to help reduce service-level wait times.

Last month it was reported that Hitachi Rail was awarded a contract to build a new 8000-series railcar fleet for the system by 2024. The factory will be located in nearby Hagerstown, Maryland. The new factory will cost \$70 million and is expected to employ 1,300 workers.

The Hitachi Rail contract was part of the Biden administration’s drive to increase manufacturing in the US. The Alliance for American Manufacturing (AAM) reportedly pressured to have the factory stationed nearby in compliance with the Buy American Act of 2021. The bill requires that 70 percent of manufactured components be produced and assembled domestically.



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