

**Council of the District of Columbia**  
**Committee of the Whole**  
**Performance Oversight Hearing**  
**Washington Metrorail Safety Commission**  
**Testimony of Sharmila Samarasinghe, Acting Chief Executive Officer**  
**March 15, 2021**

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Thank you, Chairman Mendelson and Councilmembers for inviting the Washington Metrorail Safety Commission (WMSC) to testify today.

**Introduction**

The WMSC is the District government’s designated State Safety Oversight Agency for WMATA’s Metrorail system.<sup>1</sup> Our independence from WMATA guarantees our objectivity in monitoring the safety of the Metrorail system and the safety of employees and riders.

As you may recall, the District of Columbia, Maryland, and Virginia entered into an Interstate Compact, establishing the WMSC and granting it significant enforcement powers. In 2019, the Federal Transit Administration officially certified our rail safety oversight program based on our authority, staff expertise, and specific oversight protocols. We are responsible for audits, investigations, inspections, emergency management oversight, corrective action plan oversight, and oversight of Metrorail’s safety certification process for projects like Silver Line Phase 2.

Our oversight authority over the Metrorail system is broad and expansive. This authority, however, does not extend to WMATA's bus fleet or MetroAccess services.

**Audits**

Perhaps the most notable aspect of this oversight work last year was our safety audits. As required by federal law, we conduct triennial safety audits of various aspects of Metrorail. Since last year’s performance hearing, we completed audits of Metrorail’s Track Maintenance and Associated Training; Rail Operations Control Center; Roadway Worker Protection and Compliance; Elevated Structures Inspection, Maintenance and Repair; and Roadway Maintenance Machine Inspection, Maintenance and Training.

Our safety audit report of the Rail Operations Control Center (ROCC) was released last September and identified serious safety concerns in the ROCC. We increased our focus on the ROCC in December 2019 when we observed chaos and dysfunction in the ROCC, especially during emergencies. From December 2019 through September 2020, the WMSC identified and issued a total of 25 findings related to safety gaps in the ROCC. Starting in May 2020, Metrorail committed to comprehensive changes to the ROCC as required by our findings. That process still has a long way to go. The ROCC audit findings were based on months spent interviewing Metrorail staff, reviewing

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<sup>1</sup> See the Washington Metrorail Safety Commission Establishment Act of 2016, effective April 7, 2017 (D.C. Law 21-250; D.C. Official Code § 9-1109.11).

documents, audio recordings, and data recordings, and conducting independent observations. We interviewed 21 of 26 of Metrorail's certified controllers. We took care to minimize any operational impacts on Metrorail and to ensure that these controllers could speak freely by holding our interviews in an off-site location.

In response to each finding we issue, WMATA is required to develop, gain our approval for, then implement corrective action plans to ensure continued safety improvements in the Metrorail system. While some CAPs are straightforward, addressing underlying issues or dealing with capital construction can be more complex and can take more time to complete. The WMSC considers the implementation timeline when determining whether to approve Metro's proposed plans, and Metro then commits to meeting the timeline for required fixes.

In the case of the ROCC, for example, some CAPs may be completed in a few months, while building capacity and ensuring lasting adequate staffing will take years. Once WMATA performs the required actions tied to each CAP and the WMSC completes the needed verifications, we close the CAP. In 2020, the WMSC closed 41 CAPs. The corrective action plans are an indicator that there is robust and proactive oversight that identifies gaps in Metrorail's performance and gets WMATA to work on solutions to fix these safety gaps. We are currently overseeing 58 open CAPs, but this number is fluid as Metrorail completes some CAPs and the WMSC approves others for implementation. For example, late last week WMATA submitted draft CAP proposals on time in response to the Elevated Structures Audit we issued in January, and WMSC staff are now reviewing those proposals.

## **Inspections**

Another way we provide oversight of Metrorail is through inspections. Our experts inspect track and structures, signals systems, electrical power, railcars, and other aspects of Metrorail's operations. We cover all aspects of the Metrorail system, from trains and stations to rail yards, power substations, the ROCC, and Metrorail personnel readiness. The WMSC conducts ongoing monitoring of the Metrorail system using recorded and real time communications, to keep a constant set of eyes and ears on the system. The WMSC also conducts inspections of the emergency readiness and response infrastructure, assets, and equipment in the Metrorail system. To bolster our emergency preparedness and response, we hired an emergency management specialist last year, who has enabled us to more closely participate in Metrorail's remote emergency operations sessions and to make more informed assessments of responses to Metrorail emergencies and areas for improvement. We monitor real world events, including Metrorail operations during severe weather, and events involving significant crowds and demand for service, such as Independence Day and the Presidential Inauguration. Overall in 2020, we undertook approximately 190 risk-based inspections, identifying positive practices at times, and pointing out deficiencies to WMATA and verifying fixes at others.

## **Investigations**

When safety events, such as a collision, derailment, or certain near misses, take place, WMATA is required to conduct thorough investigations with our oversight. Under our direction, WMATA prepares detailed final reports. For example, the investigation is continuing into the July 7, 2020, derailment of a Red Line train outside of the Silver Spring Metro Station. In that case, two WMSC experts responded to the scene to participate in the investigation. When that final report is complete, our commissioners will consider and then adopt the report at a public meeting, and we then publish that report on our website.

The WMSC team also responded to other events, such as the October train pull-apart on the

Red Line near Union Station. In addition to being on the scene of that event, the WMSC participated in the examination of the coupler assembly in a rail yard the following day. The investigation is ongoing, and WMATA is keeping all 6000-series trains out of service.

The point of these investigations is to ensure that the lessons learned lead to safety improvements that reduce the likelihood of a similar event happening again. In 2020, our commissioners adopted 35 investigation reports. An additional 15 reports have been adopted and published so far this year.

### **Public Transportation Agency Safety Plan**

Another important recent milestone in our work with Metrorail and the Federal Transit Administration is the approval of WMATA's new Public Transportation Agency Safety Plan. This document lays out WMATA's commitments to safety at all levels and specifies how the commitments to a positive safety culture will be carried out. The plan ensures WMATA continually evaluates the effectiveness of its safety mitigations, supports the identification of new hazards, and determines the need for new way to control risks. We at the WMSC are similarly focused on continual safety improvement at Metrorail and continual improvement of our own organization to best serve the riding public, workers, and first responders.

### **Annual Reporting**

You have access on our website to our Annual Safety Report of the Metrorail system and our Annual Operations Report of our own performance that was published last June, and we will be sending you our reports covering calendar year 2020 this spring. Those reports will also be available to the public on our website. We are also set next month to adopt our legally required independent financial audit. These reports were firsts for us this past year and will be part of our regular program going forward.

### **Conclusion**

Again, thank you for inviting me to testify on our work with WMATA to continually improve the safety of the Metrorail system. I look forward to your questions.