City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: APRIL 2, 2009

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF THE CITY COUNCIL

FROM: JAMES K. HARTMANN, CITY MANAGER

SUBJECT: BUDGET MEMO # 69 : ANALYSIS OF DOT PARATRANSIT AND
                   METROACCESS SERVICES

This memorandum is in response to Council Member Lovain's request for an analysis of the usage trends and ridership for the DOT Paratransit and WMATA MetroAccess programs. Councilman Krupicka's inquiry into implementing ride sharing, travel training, and fare incentives in the DOT Paratransit program as a potential area for cost reduction will also be addressed within this memo.

The staff conclusion of this memo is as follows:

At this time, City staff recommends pursuing a combination of available options for cost savings. First, Alexandria should participate in a WMATA travel training program so long as the City's costs are relatively low, and reevaluate the investment and options once program data becomes available. Second, the City should consider increasing the fare for DOT service for the ADA required in-city (and up to ½ to ¾ miles outside the City limits) service to $2.50 per trip from the current $2.00. The fare for trips outside this service area would be increased to $3.50 (currently $2.50). It should be recognized that an increase to the fare for DOT paratransit service will likely be met by opposition from Alexandria's disabled community. These options could save the City between $25,000 and $40,000 annually in paratransit subsidies. These coverage areas and distances are intended as an illustrative example; before any new fare structure was implemented, the City would need to develop official policies on coverage areas for the different service tiers.

Background

The City of Alexandria provides two programs for paratransit residents, DOT and MetroAccess. DOT is a paratransit program provided by the City of Alexandria that complies with all the provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. DOT is a curb-to-curb service (not door-to-door), which means users must be waiting at the curb when the ride arrives. The City provides the DOT program through contractors. The MetroAccess program is the ADA paratransit service for the Washington Metropolitan region and is operated under contract by

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WMATA. MetroAccess provides door-to-door transportation services for eligible riders. While these programs provide similar services, the differences between the two means that there are really two distinct user groups: users who do not require pick-up at their door and travel within Northern Virginia (DOT); and users who require pick-up at their door and travel anywhere in the D.C. metropolitan area (MetroAccess). Users may choose one over the other, or some residents may utilize both services depending on the details of their trip, but typically residents who can use DOT choose that service because it costs them less and provides a higher quality of service based on customer satisfaction.

The cost to the user for DOT ($2 for in-City service; $2.50 for out-of-City service) is always less than or equal to the cost of MetroAccess service ($2.50 to $6.50 depending on distance). This results in most users choosing DOT over MetroAccess when possible. Based on the best available data, the cost per mile to the City is higher for DOT (about $4/mile) than MetroAccess (about $2/mile). Overall, DOT quality of service based on customer satisfaction rates is higher than MetroAccess.

Service Details

The DOT program provides both taxicab and lift-equipped van service for trips throughout the City of Alexandria, Arlington County, Fairfax County, the City of Falls Church, and the City of Fairfax. This service is offered seven days a week at a fare of $2.00 per person per one-way trip within the City of Alexandria, or $2.50 per one-way trip outside the City. MetroAccess provides service to locations in D.C.; Montgomery, Prince George's, Arlington, and Fairfax counties; and the cities of Alexandria, Fairfax, and Falls Church. This service is also provided seven days a week with fares ranging from $2.50 to $6.50 per person per one-way trip. The actual fare is determined by distance (specifically measured by "zones traveled") with some additional costs if the trip begins or ends more than ¾ of a mile from the nearest MetroBus stop or 1½ miles from a MetroRail station.

The table below shows a comparison of the DOT and MetroAccess programs.

	DOT Paratransit	MetroAccess
FY 2009 City Subsidy	$1,432,828	$607,621
Trips Scheduled	4,700 per month	1,300 per month
Average Trip Distance	6 miles	23 miles
Average Cost per Trip	$25	$38
Average Cost per Mile	$4	$2

Analysis done by City staff suggests that there are currently few instances of citizens using MetroAccess service where they have the opportunity to use DOT paratransit instead. Because the cost of using DOT (especially for longer distance trips in Northern Virginia) is less expensive to the user than MetroAccess, most users naturally opt for DOT. Based upon the best available data from WMATA, MetroAccess costs the City less per mile than DOT (about $2/mile versus $4/mile); so an effort to get people to utilize DOT rather than MetroAccess would likely cost the City more each year in subsidies.

Currently, there are four possible cost reduction options the City can pursue: ride sharing; travel training; fare incentives; and DOT service reductions.

Ride Sharing

Public transportation is premised on a shared-ride concept. At any time on any vehicle, whether fixed-route or paratransit, there may be multiple riders with differing pick-up and drop-off points. DOT is currently transporting some passengers on a shared ride basis. A good example of this is the numerous DOT users that are transported to the Alexandria Adult Day Services Center at 1108 Jefferson Street every day. Because there are multiple users going to the same destination with prescheduled trip times, it is relatively easy to realize some efficiency through ride sharing. There are still other opportunities for DOT to increase ride sharing, especially for longer trips. Subscription trips are the most likely to be considered for ride sharing because they usually have the same pick-up times and locations.

One challenge associated with ride sharing is the coordination of the shared ride trips. Passengers have to know that they are riding with other passengers and may have to adjust their trip times accordingly. This is likely to increase no shows and no show fees. Also, some paratransit advocacy groups have an aversion to ride sharing, as they are concerned that ridesharing increases trip time.

Sec. 37.131 of DOT ADA Regulations says there cannot be an "excessive trip length." An excessive trip length would be over 1.5 times as long as the available fixed route service. In other words, if a fixed route trip is 30 minutes, then the paratransit trip cannot be more than 45 minutes. This regulation means that any ridesharing has to be limited to passengers in close proximity to each other.

Ridesharing is a good option if one can find the right mix of subscription riders with close pick-up and drop-off locations, while at the same time making sure the passengers do not have disabilities preventing them from riding with one another.

Travel Training

Travel training involves offering individualized training designed to teach people with disabilities how to safely and independently travel on public fixed-route transportation. There is some potential for cost savings, but travel training needs to be offered to the passengers during the initial application process in order to be at all effective. Once a person uses paratransit service, it is uncommon that they want to try travel training.

WMATA is currently working on a proposal to develop a regional travel training consortium. Their proposal would likely involve a two-year pilot project (funded by federal grant monies) that the City will participate in. WMATA is seeking federal grant funding for this pilot program, which would not result additional costs to the jurisdictions. The costs to the City of continuing this type of program into the future are not likely to be significant.

The potential cost savings resulting from a good travel training program could be significant. As an example, if just 5 DOT users were travel trained to use fixed-route transit rather than paratransit 1 time per week, the City would save about $6,500 annually. Another way to look at it is for every DOT rider that chooses to use fixed-route transit the City saves about $25 per trip,

and similarly saves about $38 per trip for MetroAccess riders. Any savings estimates need to be weighed against the cost of the travel training program and any potential revenue losses resulting from reduced fare programs. This analysis would need be performed prior to the investment of City funds in a specific travel training program.

If the City were to pursue a travel training program on its own, the potential for cost savings would likely not be outweighed by the program costs. Because of this, participation in a regional program, like WMATA's, where the City can share program costs with neighboring jurisdictions, is the best route the City can take at this time. However, the City will continue to evaluate possibilities, particularly utilizing data that comes out of the WMATA pilot program.

Fare Incentives

A third option for cost savings that follows logically from a travel training program is the development of fare incentives for eligible riders on fixed-route transit service. Such an incentive could take the form of either a free or reduced fare for paratransit-eligible riders. The benefit of such a program is that the riders may choose to use the less expensive (on a per ride basis) fixed route transit options rather than paratransit service. The risk with this type of program is the ever-increasing number of applicants seeking free or discounted public transportation, which may ultimately lead to higher overall costs to the City. It is also important to note that at current DASH rates without implementing any fare incentive program, it only costs the user half as much to use fixed-route transit instead of paratransit ($1.25 for DASH vs. $2.50 for MetroAccess).

Neither Alexandria nor Arlington transit systems are currently participating in WMATA's MetroAccess free ride program. In the case of the City, implementing a fare incentive program on the DASH system would create pressure to implement similar programs for the elderly and students, which could ultimately cost DASH upwards of $300,000 annually. DASH would also need to adjust the current procedures for collecting fares in order to account for multiple rates.

In June 2008, the ATC Board of Directors considered the request from the ACDP to implement the MetroAccess free ride program. The Board did not believe that it had enough information on the potential revenue impacts of the free rides, nor did they have any information from the other local systems on the positive or negative impacts of the program (WMATA has not completed a complete evaluation of the program at this point). In addition, the Board discussed the fact that DASH already provides a fare incentive to MetroAccess riders. People who ride MetroAccess pay two times the cost of the fare on DASH. So, a Metro Access trip costs $2.50 while a DASH trip costs $1.25 and the rider can pick up a free 4 hour transfer pass good on any DASH bus in any direction.

DOT Service or Fare Adjustments

Because the DOT service actually costs the City more per mile than MetroAccess, the City could marginally reduce transit subsidy funding by encouraging DOT users to switch to MetroAccess. This would not be an easy undertaking as DOT is less expensive to the user and provides a higher quality of service in terms of customer satisfaction. The easiest way to accomplish this goal would be to reduce DOT service coverage. Legally, DOT only has to operate within ¾ of a mile from the current fixed-route transit service (DASH service in this case). By reducing DOT

to this service level, service would only need to be provided within the City limits and up to ¾ of a mile outside the City limits (coverage varies depending on fixed-route transit in the area). This option would force users wanting to travel regionally in Northern Virginia, D.C., or Maryland to use the less expensive MetroAccess service.

Another way to offset the City's costs for the DOT transit subsidy would be to implement a new fare structure. The last DOT fare increase was in 1999, and coincided with the increase of the DASH fare to $1.00. One such structure could simply involve an increase in the DOT fare. This adjustment would increase revenues to the City's contractors and therefore decrease the subsidy (net cost of service) amount the City owed to the service providers. Another, more complex, option could involve implementing a tiered rate structure for different types of service. For instance, ADA required service (trips to or from the area ¾ of a mile from current fixed-route service stops) could be the first tier of service and would be charged one rate. The City could then designate other coverage as "premium service" and charge a higher rate for this second tier service. Premium service would include such things as trips outside the ADA-required service area and/or same day requests for service. These coverage areas and distances are intended as an illustrative example; before any new fare structure was implemented, the City would need to develop official policies on coverage areas for the different service tiers.

If the DOT fare was increased to $2.50 inside the City (the ADA sets the maximum paratransit fare in areas DASH serves at twice the DASH rate of $1.25 per trip) and $3.50 outside the City, the existing fare incentive which tends to cause users to use DOT service over MetroAccess or fixed-route transit options would diminish. These rates would be more consistent with those of Arlington's STAR service (the most similar service provider to DOT) and better relate to the high level of service provided by the DOT program. The combination of additional revenues and the potential swing of users to MetroAccess and fixed-route transit could save the City between $25,000 and $40,000 annually in paratransit subsidies.

Staff Recommendation

At this time, City staff recommends pursuing a combination of these available options. First, Alexandria should participate in a WMATA travel training program so long as the City's costs are relatively low, and reevaluate our investment and options once program data becomes available. Second, the City should consider increasing the fare for DOT service for the ADA required in-city (and ½ to ¾ miles outside the City limits) service to $2.50 per trip. The fare for trips outside this service area would be increased to $3.50 (currently $2.50). It should be recognized that any increase to the fare for DOT paratransit service will likely be met by opposition from Alexandria's disabled community. Altogether, these options could save the City between $25,000 and $40,000 annually in paratransit subsidies. These coverage areas and distances are intended as an illustrative example; before any new fare structure was implemented, the City would need to develop official policies on coverage areas for the different service tiers.