



FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
WASHINGTON

Mike O'Rielly
Commissioner

September 7, 2016

Mr. Paul J. Wiedefeld
General Manager and Chief Executive Officer
Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority
600 5th Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20001

Dear Mr. Wiedefeld:

I acknowledge the extremely difficult task with which you are charged in your capacity of overseeing the D.C. Metro system. For too long, problems with the system were allowed to fester unabated, multiplying their seriousness and increasing the resources needed to resolve them. On a daily basis, the entire D.C. metropolitan region is now living with the disruption caused by a multi-year effort to finally address past neglect and future system needs.

A key component in improving the infrastructure of D.C. Metro and repairing the relationship with its passengers is restoring overall physical safety to the rider experience. For that to occur, passengers actually must be safe and feel equally secure in their daily transit trips, which includes their ability to reach emergency personnel in appropriate circumstances. As many experts have recognized, the current wireless communications capabilities within the metro system are severely lacking, but improvements are scheduled to take place over multiple years. For instance, it was estimated that it would take five years to upgrade and install equipment for riders to be able to access wireless communications throughout all of Metro's tunnels.

As a not infrequent rider of the D.C. Metro system, as someone whose family uses the system, and as someone responsible for ensuring public safety communications are available and reliable for the public's use during times of need, I seek to obtain additional information regarding the status of recent efforts to improve wireless communications within the D.C. Metro system.

In February, WMATA announced that it would be installing hundreds of miles of coaxial cables within the system's tunnels. As proposed, the cables will be used by the nationwide commercial wireless carriers as segments are completed to improve radio communications for first responders and train passengers using wireless devices. Since that announcement, however, little information has been made publicly available on the status, timeline and potential obstacles to completing this project. Can you provide additional details on this project and its expected completion date? What percentage of the project has been successfully completed? How many segments have been installed and how many are being used by wireless providers to extend their network reach within the tunnel system?

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Further, just last week, the public was notified about WMATA's Wi-Fi pilot project at six Metro stations. In order to have a greater understanding of the pilot, it would be helpful if you could shed greater light on the justification for the pilot, whether there are any limitations on the ability of users to contact public safety officials or other constraints regarding how the system can be used, what exactly will be analyzed during the evaluation period, and what is the expected capacity in terms of numbers of unique users and anticipated Internet access speed. Additionally, is Metro working with a private sector partner in deploying and maintaining Wi-Fi in these stations and what equipment is being installed?

While I am a strong overall proponent of Wi-Fi, at least one aspect of the pilot does raise some concern. Specifically, it is my understanding that the project will last 45 days and then be suspended pending evaluation. I am at a loss as to why these critical communications features would be disabled at a set date. The data collected during the test period should be able to be analyzed without turning off the Wi-Fi network.

Given the overall questionable state of communications capabilities within the entire system, it seems counterintuitive to cease operations of an additional mechanism that the public can use to reach emergency personnel when warranted. Does WMATA have procedures in place to reconsider its decision to disable its Wi-Fi network pilot? Under WMATA's current plan, what criteria will be used to determine whether the Wi-Fi system should be turned back on and what is the timeframe for such a decision? What is the perceived timeframe for rolling out Wi-Fi in Metro's other stations? Does Metro envision expanding Wi-Fi to other portions of its system, such as the tunnels, and what is the timeframe for this expansion?

I thank you in advance for providing further information on matters of critical importance to the communication needs and safety of D.C. metro system riders and employees.

Sincerely,



Michael O'Rielly
Commissioner

cc: The Honorable Thomas Wheeler
Ms. Carolyn Flowers