

Here's What to Know About Metro's Proposed Service Cuts



A Red Line train at the Silver Spring Metro station. (Sarah L. Voisin/The Washington Post)
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Metro has proposed the most severe service cuts in its history because of steep fare revenue losses due to the coronavirus pandemic. The proposed cuts include eliminating weekend rail service, shortening the system's hours of operation, slashing Metrobus routes by more than half, closing 16 percent of stations, sending fewer trains to suburban stops and laying off up to 3,800 workers. How did the nation's third-largest transit agency get here, and how will it get back?

How did Metro get to this point?

The pandemic wiped out hundreds of millions of dollars in expected fare revenue. Before the pandemic, Metro's revenue this fiscal year from fares and parking was projected at \$823 million. That projection was revised downward in recent months to about \$183 million. Once the pandemic hit in March, ridership on Metrorail nosedived more than 90 percent while

Metrobus ridership plummeted by at least 70 percent. A combination of high unemployment rates, mass telecommuting and fear of contracting the coronavirus has led people away from transit.

Over the past eight months, riders have slowly trickled back. That hasn't converted into actual dollars, mostly because Metrobus — which has seen the most growth — hasn't accepted fares for months. To protect bus operators from possible exposure to the coronavirus, the transit agency is routing bus passengers through the middle doors and keeping the front of buses, including fareboxes, isolated. In January, Metro will resume front-door boarding and fare collecting.

How big of a deficit are we talking about?

Metro says it has been running a deficit of more than \$1 million each weekday since the pandemic hit. Some of the hit comes from more than \$17 million in increased costs for personal protective equipment, cleaning and disinfecting supplies and services. While \$767 million from the federal pandemic relief plan — known as the Cares Act — helped to stabilize Metro's budget last spring, the money is set to run out in March. That means a \$176.5 million funding gap for the final months of this fiscal year.

Because fare revenue is still expected to remain low in July — the start of the next fiscal year — Metro will need to cut even more from its operating budget. How much? Metro's typical annual budget is about \$2 billion. To meet revenue projections, Metro said, it will need to cut \$494.5 million, about a fourth of what the transit agency typically spends in a year.

What about help from another federal stimulus or bailout?

Yes, there has been a lot of talk about a second coronavirus stimulus, which would help households, business owners, airlines and other industries. The stimulus would be the second in a year, following the Cares Act.

Several bills are being proposed. The American Public Transportation Association is calling on Congress to provide public transportation with at least \$32 billion from a relief bill. The U.S. House has passed a bill that included money for transit, but the Senate is locked in disagreement over whether transit should be included, among several other sticking points. Democrats have been supportive of giving transit agencies another bailout, while most Republican Senate proposals have not included money for public transportation. Without aid, most transit agencies are planning service cuts, buyouts or layoffs. Metro officials say the agency could reverse cuts if it receives federal help, but officials warn that transit service is easy to stop and hard to restart. Once trained staff members — such as bus and train operators — are laid off, it takes time to hire and retrain people to ramp service back up. The sooner Congress could provide aid, the less impact riders would feel.

What are the highlights of Metro's proposed cuts?

Weekend Metrorail service would be eliminated starting July 1. Weekday waits for trains would be 30 minutes except in core parts of the District, where waits could be 15 minutes. Metrorail would close two hours early Monday through Friday, at 9 p.m. The Yellow Line would run only to Mount Vernon Square. Riders at suburban Maryland stations would see about half the

number of trains on the Red Line than other riders. The same would occur for riders on the Silver Line west of Ballston.

What are the 19 stations that would be closed?

Metro said the stations were chosen because of low use or because they were within reasonable walking distance to bigger, busier stations. The 19 are the same stations Metro closed for several months earlier this year. They closures would include these stations:

- Archives
- Arlington Cemetery
- Cheverly
- Clarendon
- Cleveland Park
- College Park
- East Falls Church
- Eisenhower Avenue
- Federal Center
- Federal Triangle
- Greensboro
- Grosvenor-Strathmore
- Judiciary Square
- McLean
- Morgan Boulevard
- Mount Vernon Square
- Smithsonian
- Van Dorn Street and
- Virginia Square-GMU.

What about Metrobus?

Metrobus service would drop to 45 percent of what it offered before the pandemic. Routes that could see full, reduced, consolidated or no service would be decided based on a few factors: Current demand; neighborhoods income status and access to transportation alternatives; proximity to health care facilities and redundancies with other routes. Bus service could be extended to cover absent rail service on the weekend. Metro released a detailed look at an early route plan on its website.

Wouldn't longer waits and fewer routes create more crowded trains and buses, creating a risk due to the pandemic?

That's what happened when Metro ratcheted back service in March. Buses on some of Metro's busiest routes were packed. Some rail cars also were full at peak times. After weeks of complaints, Metro added buses and rail cars to busy routes and lines, but officials put much of the responsibility for staying safe on riders.

Metro urged people not to ride unless they had an essential need, such as commuting to work, shopping for food or going to doctor's appointments. Metro urged riders to distance themselves from others, even if that meant waiting for the next train or bus. Masks remain mandatory on all Metro rides.

How do I comment on the proposed cuts?

Metro is asking for input. Board members plan to host public hearings, where people can hear more information on the proposals and submit testimony. Once board members announce the public comment period, which could happen in mid-January, people can go to Metro's website and their public comment section or call Metro at (202) 962-1901 and leave a comment up to two minutes long. Those comments will be included in information board members will review before making a decision. Comments left now will not be included in Metro's formal report to board members. Metro's board will vote on the proposed budget plan in March.

Will Metro go back to normal when vaccines become widely available?

Define normal. Life probably will have changed because of the pandemic. People might still be scared of riding transit, while others won't have a need for it because of job losses or work-from-home arrangements. A number of companies have found telecommuting is just as effective as having employees in a central location.

Commuters make up the biggest chunk of Metro riders, but two big groups of riders should come back: Federal workers — Metro's largest customer base — and school students. The transit system operates as the District's "school bus" system, shuttling students across the city. D.C. government has provided all youth under the age of 21 with free transit cards. While it's not known if the city will continue to subsidize the cards, schools and colleges are ultimately expected to resume full schedules.

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