

WMATA and Gentrification: A Balance Between Rail Accessibility and Increasing Prices

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A northbound Green Line train arrives at the Anacostia station.

Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority officials said balancing rail accessibility and potential expansion with gentrification is a priority, even with new rail expansion planned in the D.C., Maryland and Virginia region.

The Maryland Department of Transportation, in partnership with WMATA, is expected to finish construction of the Purple Line, a new, 16-mile light rail line by [late 2027](#).

The line will run through [affluent and lower-income areas](#) in Maryland's Montgomery and Prince George's counties. Several individuals across the District – including WMATA officials, residents and advocates – spoke on rail accessibility and its impact on long-term displacement.

A Historical View of WMATA

Zachary Schrag is a U.S. history professor at George Mason University and writer of “The Great Society Subway: A History of the Washington Metro.”

He described how the dynamic between growing rents and rail expansion is “basic logic” in a capitalist society.

“Any kind of improvement, whether it's a transit system or a park or better schools or less air pollution, anything that makes a neighborhood more desirable, will drive up rents. And it can be hard to protect the people who are already living there,” he said.

According to an [analysis](#) at Howard University, the Purple Line will run through neighborhoods whose income distribution has radically changed in the last decade. The analysis stated, “The number of households with incomes under \$100,000 fell in all brackets; and rose for all brackets above \$100,000, even after adjusting for inflation.” The analysis speculated further displacement as a possibility for these areas.

When asked about the Purple Line, Schrag said, “It’s hard to imagine that the Purple Line will be anything like the projected ridership. That’s often true of rail lines, but even truer since the outbreak of pandemic.”

Schrag said that beyond new expansion, WMATA and transit systems worldwide must rethink the functionality of public transportation.

“In some sense, the subway was conceived in the 1900s ... as a machine to deliver people to offices. And if people aren’t going to offices, then you don’t need that machine anymore,” Schrag said. “So, I think the future of transit in the United States and worldwide is facing a fundamental question of how the service can be reconfigured if office workers are no longer working a five-day work week.”

The ‘Washingtonian’ Perspective

Kevin Jackson, a lead line cook in Shenkman Dining Hall at The George Washington University, described himself as a ‘Washingtonian’ — born and raised in Anacostia, D.C. He praised the D.C. rail system.

“I think that the rail system in DC is probably the best rail system in the world. It’s easy to ride. It’s easy to read ... it’s (really) convenient. It’ll take you to everywhere you need to go,” Jackson said. “Whoever thought of the rail in Washington D.C. was a genius.”

Jackson said, however, the convenience of the Metro comes at a steep price.

“The cost of living in the District is extremely high... regardless of if Metro is out there or not. But Metro plays a part because it’s convenient,” he said. “Where I grew up... they (now) have half a million-dollar homes. I grew up in the ghetto of Washington, D.C. (One of) the toughest areas in the city... (my community) can’t afford that...”

The Union Representation – Local 689

Matthew Girardi is the political director and communications director for Amalgamated Transit Union Local 689. He represents over 15,000 transit workers and retirees throughout the D.C. region, including WMATA Metro, DC Circulator and the DC Streetcar.

More than 51,000 passengers rode WMATA rail during its first phases in the 1970s. Currently, it boasts over [600,000 daily passengers](#) and [12,000 WMATA employees](#) across the DMV, including 1,500 in D.C. Despite these successes, Girardi said WMATA has a complicated history with gentrification, housing displacement and race in the D.C. region.

“A lot of the idea and the modern impetus for Metro came as the federal government was largely clearing out a lot of working-class Black and Brown communities — mixed-race communities as well — to build interstate highways and freeways through downtown cities, just completely eviscerating them,” Girardi said.

With that background, Girardi said that unlike some unions, Local 689 focuses on both job-related and living-related issues for its constituents.

“We have to not only fight for (our constituents) on the job but make sure that their schools are good, they're safe, that the housing is affordable, that the food they're able to purchase is nutritious,” he said. “Transit workers are working people too, and so that means (housing affordability and displacement) ... affect them as much as they affect somebody who's a nurse or a teacher or a firefighter.”

WMATA's Trouble with Bureaucracy

Mark Phillips is a senior director of regional mobility and planning for WMATA. He described how WMATA runs into issues when considering gentrification and displacement in its plans.

“We plan, fund, build and design our transit system. But our jurisdictional partners, the cities and counties and states that we serve, they're the ones who have land use power,” Phillips said. “In terms of land use development and the cost of housing, we (WMATA) have very little direct influence or control over that ... (city, state and county land use regulators) don't give that power up easily.”

Phillips acknowledged more accessible transit brings benefits but does not come without costs.

“Bringing transit... creates job opportunities... there's still a lot more opportunity there to not only make more jobs accessible but make them accessible more quickly,” he said. “(However) because transit will raise property values, that means over time, there is some risk of ... gentrification.”

Phillips said WMATA does consider gentrification but must balance developer and government expectations for budgets.

“All transit agencies should be factoring (gentrification) into their expansion plans, their system plans, but across the country, in every single place in the United States, it’s the responsibility, the power (of city, county, and state governments) to have land use controls and incentives and subsidy programs that help fight gentrification,” Phillips said.