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D.C.'s bus blues

By Michaela Platzer

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In Metro's fiscal year 2025 budget letter, WMATA's General Manager and CEO Randy Clarke wrote, "Metro's focus is, and will always be, our customers." I want to take him at his word, but I am disillusioned about that promise of customer commitment after attending several "Better Bus" public hearings, town hall forums and pop-up events this summer. I fear the city's plans will fall far short of its stated goals of making bus transit the preferred mode of choice by 2030 and increasing public transit use for commuting to half of trips by 2032.

At its many forums, Metro officials have failed to answer key questions about equity and access to a critical public service that should be funded as such. Metro's plan fails to recognize the vital role of Metrobuses in the lives of many of us. Our needs are simple: nearby, fast, frequent and reliable buses.

In the four forums I attended, D.C. residents of all demographics said they want the bus: seniors who can't drive, parents of schoolchildren, people with disabilities and everyday workers traveling to and from their offices. Metro's customers loudly voiced their concerns about the proposed changes, which directly impact their access to schools, hospitals, work and local businesses.

Yet bus lines are being cut and reduced in my neighborhood, which is becoming a veritable bus desert.

I live more than two miles from the nearest Metrorail station. Until 2022, I could take the E6 bus line, which WMATA quietly canceled with limited public notice during the coronavirus pandemic. I now must walk 45 minutes to take Metrorail. This is just not reasonable and sometimes not possible. Under the city's proposed plans, other bus lines in my area — the M4, E4 and L2 — will be reduced or rerouted with what seems to be little understanding of what these changes will mean to everyday bus riders who want to take the bus to where they need to go. Chevy Chase residents already have very limited access to weekend bus service. The so-called Better Bus overhaul will shrink this even further as the E4 will no longer offer weekend service.

Is Metro really listening to its customers? Is the proposed Better Bus plan actually better? As a decades-long regular bus rider committed to public transit, I say the answer is a resounding no to both questions.