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# Metro Chief Predicts Transit 'Death Spiral' Without Extra Funds

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Budget disputes in Maryland and Virginia and on Capitol Hill threaten to push the region's transit system into a "death spiral" littered with broken-down trains, overcrowded buses, frozen escalators and crumbling parking lots, Metro's top manager said yesterday.

"We're talking about a systemic service meltdown condition as early as three years from now," Metro Chief Executive Richard A. White told his board of directors. "It's reliability falling, ridership loss, road congestion increasing and air quality decreasing. It's a death spiral."

The 27-year-old transit system needs \$1.5 billion over the next six years for maintenance, the purchase of enough rail cars to run eight-car trains and prevent jam-packed conditions, and to buy 185 additional buses to alleviate crowding on popular routes. The first down payment of \$34 million is due in October, when Metro must order 50 of 120 new rail cars.

Without the money, the rail system will grind to a halt, said White, who conjured up memories of the 1999 Cherry Blossom mutiny, when passengers fed up with a rash of breakdowns refused to get off a broken-down train, and the Red Line shutdown two weeks ago that dumped thousands of riders onto city streets. "These are examples of the kinds of things people can expect to see on a more regular basis," he said.

Metro has been struggling to pay its operating costs and is planning to raise fares for the second consecutive year. The \$1.5 billion sought by Metro has nothing to do with the regular operating budget -- it is needed for new equipment, White said.

But the federal, state and local governments that fund Metro are paralyzed by their own budget fights, leaving transit officials panicked about how they will afford the trains, buses and maintenance equipment to keep the system running.

"Right now, there's no money for transportation funding in anyone's budget," said Chris Zimmerman, who represents Arlington County on the Metro board. "I've got a state government that's happy to let everything fall into the toilet. And we've got local governments that have limited means to raise money. We've got nothing to work with."

Robert T. Grow, staff director for the transportation committee of the Greater Washington Board of Trade, said he couldn't remember when local, state and federal budgets had been so stymied. "I don't recall when we've been stuck on dead center, bottom of the barrel in all three areas," he said. "Money is just a huge issue. One thing is extraordinarily clear. If we don't raise the money, our region is simply going to choke on traffic congestion. And not just congestion on the roads. Congestion in the Metro. We

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need these eight-car trains."

The subway was built to operate eight-car trains, but Metro has never owned enough rail cars to run trains that long. Instead, it operates a mix of four- and six-car trains. An eight-car train can carry 200 more riders than a six-car train. Transit officials say lengthening trains is the most cost-effective way to add capacity.

In Maryland, Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. (R) has said he is committed to funding Maryland's share of Metro's \$1.5 billion budget, but a proposal from the House of Delegates is less generous and the Senate has yet to act on transportation plans. In Virginia, neither the House nor the Senate would add significant funding for transportation.

Metro managers suggested yesterday that local governments could float bonds to finance the \$1.5 billion for the transit system, but some board members said the counties and the District are restricted in the amount of debt they can assume.

"The District has a debt ceiling we're very close to," said Gladys W. Mack, who represents the city on the Metro board. "We've got significant infrastructure needs -- lead in the water and our public schools, to name a few."

Mack and others on the board started spinning out other ideas, including a regional tax and a surcharge on fares so that riders, for the first time, would help to pay capital as well as operating costs.

White said it doesn't appear that Metro can count on financial help from Capitol Hill, either. Transit officials say they have been trying to get special consideration, arguing that Metro is a creation of Congress, nearly half of the rush-hour passengers are federal employees and more than 50 federal agencies are located at or adjacent to Metro stations.

Congress has been debating reauthorization of the nation's transportation bill, but the White House has threatened to veto versions proposed by both the House and the Senate, saying they are too expensive. President Bush's version of the transportation bill would not include extra funding for Metro.

Rep. Thomas M. Davis III (R-Va.) is weighing whether to seek special appropriations for Metro that would be separate from the transportation bill and plans a hearing in June to examine Metro's financial needs, spokesman David Marin said. "But this is a complicated equation," Marin cautioned. "Budgets are tight for governments across the country, and in Congress, Metro funding competes with other system needs in every other member's district. We need to proceed carefully."

In other developments, Montgomery County Executive Douglas M. Duncan (D) named Gordon Linton, the federal transit administrator in the Clinton administration, as the county's representative to the Metro board.

Duncan called Linton a champion of transit, commuter benefits and public transportation. Linton, a Rockville resident, fills the seat vacated when longtime Metro board member Carlton R. Sickles died in January. Linton's appointment to the Metro board requires final approval from the County Council.

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