



How to fix Metrorail in D.C.

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Randal O'Toole says he once rode a Washington, D.C. Metro train into a station, where the train sat for 10 minutes with its doors closed. There were no announcements from the train operator. Eventually, the operator made an announcement in a groggy voice and moved the train to the next station. Everyone who wanted to get off at the first station had to get off at the next one and take a different train back.

"The only thing I can think of is the driver fell asleep," O'Toole told the Washington Examiner. "Why aren't drivers like that fired? Well, they can't be, because they're union workers."

As a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute, working on urban and transportation issues, O'Toole has plenty of ideas about how to reform the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, which operates Metrorail. His ideas fill a gap in my recent research on WMATA, which includes riding Metro to every station in one day and speaking to frustrated riders.

O'Toole says that ATU Local 689, the union for Metro's operating, maintenance and clerical staffs, is too strong. Federal grants empower the union, giving transit agencies nationwide more money for union-friendly policies. "In order to qualify for a federal grant, [WMATA] has to keep the unions happy," O'Toole says. "So they give the unions extremely generous contracts in order to get federal dollars." Removing criteria for union-friendly policies in federal transportation grants could allow Metro to adopt rider-friendly policies instead.

Still, O'Toole believes the biggest problem with WMATA are the incentives it creates to waste money. The worse Metro gets, the more it can ask for subsidies from local, state and federal governments.

"Throwing more money at an organization whose incentive is to waste money like crazy is obviously not the solution," O'Toole says. "The more dysfunctional they are, the more we think we need to reward their dysfunction more by giving them even more money." In essence, the more Metro breaks down or endangers riders, the more the public will think that the system needs more money to fix its problems. Few are arguing that Metro needs fewer subsidies, but rewarding success instead of failure might be the fix Metro needs.

These long-term fixes would require public policy reforms. There are, however, still fixes that Metro can enact on its own without excessive government intervention.

For example, O'Toole says Metro should focus less on expanding rail service to new neighborhoods and instead use those funds for maintenance on its deteriorating current rail. He blames a federal fund that gives transit agencies money for expansion. "In both the Silver line and the Purple line's case, it's money that should have been used to rehabilitate the existing Metrorail system. We need to get rid of that slush fund which is encouraging transit agencies to spend their money in entirely the wrong places."

Metro could also consider running express bus service from distant neighborhoods into downtown Washington, rather than trying to serve those areas with rail. "Instead of having 91 stations, and to get to one station you have to stop at five or 10 other stations before you get to the one where you want to get off, you could have express buses." Unlike the New York City subway system, Metro does not operate express trains. Even if it wanted to, the necessary construction costs would be sky-high. Express buses would be subject to traffic on the roads, but they would be cheaper and could serve more distant neighborhoods than a subway can.

Two of the most commonly suggested WMATA reforms include more government subsidies and different oversight.

More revenue would likely be wasted, unless WMATA's incentives can be changed. O'Toole says federal money for urban transit agencies comes from several pots with various formulas and grant processes. Instead, he says it should be combined into one pot, with money distributed based on either how many riders a system has or how much revenue they get from fares. Historically, transit agencies have exaggerated how many riders they have in order to get more subsidies, so a ridership-based formula may not be ideal.

Some riders hope that putting Metrorail directly under supervision of the Federal Transit Administration could bring improvements. But without a change in the incentive structure, switching to different regulators is unlikely to cause improvements in accountability.

"They're just tinkering with the deck chairs," O'Toole says. Let us hope the feds aren't just tinkering with the deck chairs while WMATA sinks like the Titanic.