



TRANSPORTATION

# Can Washington, D.C., Keep Its Transit Comeback Rolling?

Few cities have seen a post-pandemic ridership bounce-back as successful as Washington, D.C.'s. But the area's transit system is looking for more help from officials in the district, Maryland and Virginia.

Jan. 6, 2025 • **Jared Brey**



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## In Brief:



- Washington, D.C.'s transit system has steadily grown its ridership since the pandemic while running more service throughout the week.
- It has managed a fiscal crisis with new funding from the district, Maryland and Virginia.
- It's seeking more recurring capital funds as it tries to carve a sustainable long-term financial path.

It's been a season of upheaval for Washington, D.C., with **cuts** to the federal workforce, a **scramble** to patch up the district's finances, a **deployment** of National Guard troops, threats of a **looming recession** and shifts in local political leadership.

But for the district's public transit system, coming off half a decade of chaos, 2025 was a period of relative calm.

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The Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) **ended** fiscal year 2025 last fall with 264 million trips, beating the previous year by 9 percent and outpacing its own projections by 16 percent. That's good news for a system that, like many others, lost most of its fare-paying riders in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Alongside New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority, Washington's buses and trains have seen some of the best ridership recovery rates in the country. On top of that, fare evasion and crime on the system have **dropped substantially** in the last few years and customer satisfaction has risen. And the authority reported saving \$120 million out of last year's budget on operating and capital expenses.

All of those performance measures should work in WMATA's favor as it seeks to resolve yet another funding gap in the coming months. In November the authority released **a plan** called DMVMoves, calling for more funding to help address a backlog of capital projects. The plan calls for \$460 million in new annual funding from the three jurisdictions that fund the system: Maryland, Virginia and Washington, D.C. It requests that the new funding — to be dedicated for things like improving its rail signal system and increasing automation of trains — grow by 3 percent per year.

“That will finally give this organization amazing sustainability,” says Randy Clarke, WMATA's general manager. “It will be a lot like a municipality from that point of view. It can really manage its finances in a top-of-the-line way.”



## More Trains, Better Service

WMATA's budgetary challenges in the wake of the pandemic were not unique. But its overall funding picture is. Most transit systems fund operations with a mix of fare revenue and local and state dollars. But Metro crosses three jurisdictions, including two states and the District of Columbia, each with their own political contexts and different ways of contributing to the system. For many years the authority's budget was cobbled together with non-recurring funds from the three jurisdictions.

Clarke was hired to run the system in 2022, when Metro was in the throes of a fiscal crisis stemming from post-pandemic rider loss. He joined WMATA on the heels of safety **emergencies** in the mid-2010s and a train **derailment** in 2021. Instead of cutting service to offset expected revenue losses, Clarke **led the charge** to reorient and train schedules to serve more people. Recognizing that transit has "heavy **fixed costs and low variable costs**," Clarke began adding **more frequent train service**

and expanding schedules on the weekends. He also posted pictures of himself riding the trains and buses on a regular basis. It was a bet that better service would help improve perceptions of the system without breaking the bank while Metro sought more operating subsidy from its funders.

“We went all in on being really good at transit,” Clarke says.

It’s paid off so far. With new operational funding from the district, Maryland and Virginia, WMATA **passed a budget** in 2024 that averted the **fiscal cliff** most transit agencies faced (and some still face) after the pandemic while staving off major service cuts. And riders are, for the most part, happy. When Metro held a sale of holiday-themed merchandise late last year, Clarke notes, it sold all 1,200 sweaters it produced in under a week.

“Our brand is very strong and the community really values Metro,” Clarke says. “The fun only happens when service is really good, and that’s what we’re focused on.”

Clarke has so far been a successful figurehead for WMATA and is about as popular as a public official can be in Washington. After Mayor Muriel Bowser announced last year that she wouldn’t seek a fourth term, the local Axios site **ran** an only-half-joking “Randy Clarke for Mayor” column. Tracy Hadden Loh, a researcher at Brookings Metro and member of WMATA’s board of directors, says Clarke’s positive energy and visibility on the trains and buses, along with public celebrations of **ridership milestones**, have helped improve the image of the system both for riders and for the officials who make funding decisions.

“Of course I want the day-to-day to be steady and excellent, but I also want to celebrate all the positive value that transit brings to the region. People just respond to that emotionally,” Loh says. “Many people are proud to call this region home and Metro is something to be proud of.”

WMATA has managed to improve its public image and pull in needed funding at a time when other transit systems are struggling on both fronts. Chicago’s transit network came close to drastic fare hikes and service cuts before an 11th-hour **deal struck** in the Illinois state legislature last year. Philadelphia’s transit system is **waiting** for new state funding, with the Republican-controlled state Senate

consistently opposed to more money for a system it portrays as wasteful. The San Francisco Bay Area transit systems — including Bay Area Rapid Transit, which once led the nation in the portion of its budget collected from fares — will be asking voters for **millions** in new funding this November. Not every system has Washington's expansive rail network, but WMATA's performance over the last few years suggests that both riders and elected officials respond positively to better service.

## Seeking Predictable Funding

Inflation has plagued transit systems nearly as much as ridership losses over the last few years. But because inflation was so widespread, Loh says it also helped WMATA make the case to its funders that it needed more money to avoid service cuts a few years ago. Transit agencies around the country are making a similar argument to the federal government this year, as they **ask Congress** to account for inflation and restore transit's "purchasing power" in its next transportation bill. And WMATA is hoping that the district, Maryland and Virginia will come through again with capital funding that could set the system on a sustainable long-term path for the first time in its history.

The DMVMoves plan calls for funding to upgrade Metro's rail system, calling for new platform doors to improve boarding safety and efficiency, replacing escalators and elevators and maintaining its bus garages, among other things. It says new funding could also help promote greater automation of its trains. But rather than committing WMATA to any specific projects, the plan asks for funding to support a comprehensive capital maintenance program that the authority can plan around.

Virginia is likely to make the first move to help fund the agency. This spring, lawmakers there will **consider a request** to increase capital funding to Metro by about \$136 million with annual increases. Maryland has been dealing with **a transportation funding challenge** of its own, and may be slower to act on WMATA's request, Clarke says. Washington, D.C., is also navigating budgetary uncertainty and heading into a new political era. But Loh says the way that jurisdictions stepped up during the last crisis shows they want the system to succeed.

ere are so many local elected leaders in this region who 100 percent understand are very comfortable saying out loud that Metro is essential and that the

region's growth is oriented around it," Loh says. "I think it happened for Metro because Metro returns so much value to the region."

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