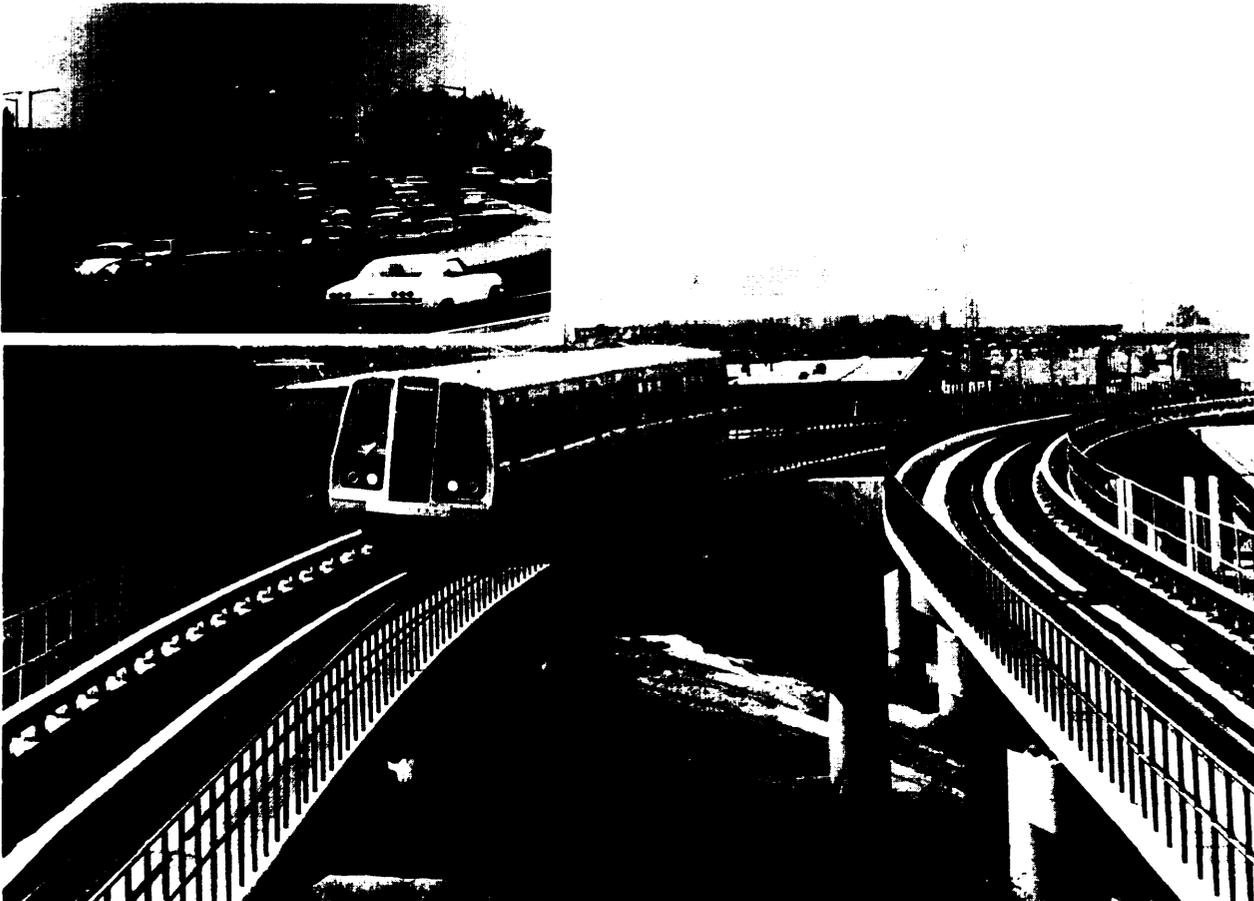


Critical History of Transit Planning and Decisionmaking

The following history covers the decisionmaking process for Washington's Metro rapid rail system from its beginning in the 1950's to the present day. The discussion centers around three key decisions: (1) studies leading to the decision to study rail transit in 1960, (2) planning for selection of a specific system, concluding in 1968, and (3) evolution of the financial commitment that allowed construction to begin. The narrative ends with a status report on the debate over how to pay for completion of the system.

Although the history focuses on the evolution of formal decisionmaking, it also briefly explains the political context of Metro planning. To a great

extent the Metro system grew out of a determined effort by civic-minded Washingtonians to stop new freeway construction. The system's purpose was to reduce auto trips between suburbs and downtown, primarily to benefit those parts of Washington that would have been destroyed to make room for new highway routes and parking garages. The system was not designed specifically to help downtown business or to make commuting from the suburbs easier. Most downtown business interests supported Metro only as part of a "balanced" transportation system. Inner city interests have influenced the system design only since it was officially adopted. Metro planners extended the system to the suburbs to get maximum patronage, yet



Public opposition to new urban highways was a major stimulus to Metro rail transit in Washington, D.C.

suburban commuters would have been equally or better served by new highways. Suburban jurisdictions supported Metro in part because they had to spend relatively little to get it.

DECISION TO STUDY TRANSIT

This section covers the period of transit planning ending in 1960 when Congress created an agency to plan a rail system for Washington. A collage assembled by WMATA shows headlines from Washington newspapers dating back to a 1909 Post feature story called “Why Not a Real Subway System for Washington?” Rapid transit was alternatively supported and discouraged in various public plans over the years, but it was not until 1952 that Congress authorized a special study of transportation needs in the national capital area. Congressional funding for this Mass Transportation Survey was finally granted in 1955. The survey’s 1959 Mass Transportation Plan roughly outlined a network of new freeways with busways and two basic rapid rail routes, along with organizational alternatives for carrying on the planning effort. Congress quickly acted to create a Federal agency to take the next steps.

Early Studies

Serious discussion about the possible need for rapid transit appears to have been motivated by the surge in population, its spread into the suburbs, and rising automobile ownership in the late 1940’s and early 1950’s.

A study published in 1944⁴ recommended a 7.1-mile system of streetcar subways to augment the surface network but concluded that rapid transit was not likely to become necessary in a city with such a low population density. However, the report suggested the subway tunnels could be modified to hold rapid rail trains if future conditions mandated.

The real catalyst for rapid transit planning in the Washington area was the spectre of traffic congestion raised by several reports on regional transportation needs published by the Washington

Metropolitan Area Transportation Study,⁵ which was a cooperative effort of area highway departments begun in 1948. Partly in response to this public concern about the implications of growth, Congress in 1952 created two comprehensive planning bodies to help guide development. The National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC) and the National Capital Regional Planning Council (NCRPC) were instructed to prepare comprehensive plans for the capital city and for the region that would include plans for the movement of goods and people. b NCPC concluded later that year that more detailed information was needed before an adequate mass transportation plan could be developed. Congress waited until 1955 to oblige with a \$400,000 grant for the two planning agencies to conduct a survey of present and future mass transportation needs.⁷

The Transportation Plan—National Capital Region of 1959

NCPC and NCRCP appointed a Joint Steering Committee to oversee the Mass Transportation Survey, created an advisory committee of transportation experts, hired a director and a small staff, and commissioned studies by a number of consultants. The most influential member of the group was Harland Bartholomew, chairman of NCPC and a member of the Joint Steering Committee of the survey, who was a strong believer in rail transit. He was also a strong believer in the merits of objective study, and he expanded the scope of the survey beyond “mass transportation” needs to include the appropriate role of the private automobile. The goals of the survey, as he articulated them, were to make a “profound effort to ascertain the relative scope and function of the automobile, the bus, the streetcar, rapid transit, and other newer concepts of transportation” and plan accordingly to provide adequate future transportation in the national capital region.

The study presented a multimodal orientation. A general development plan was created; an economic base study prepared; alternatives selected, tested, and packaged into a recommended system; and a financing and organization study conducted,

⁴See “A Recommended Highway Improvement Program,” Washington Area Metropolitan Transportation Study, 1952.

⁵Public Law 592 (66 Stat. 781), National Capital Planning Act of 1952, amending the Act of June 6, 1924 (43 Stat. 463) as amended.

⁷Public Law 84-24 (69 Stat. 33), Second Supplemental Appropriations Act of 1955.

⁴Transportation Survey and Plan for the Central Area of Washington, D. C., J. E. Greiner Co. and DeLeuw, Cather & Co. in cooperation with the District of Columbia Department of Highways; the D.C. Department of Vehicles and Traffic; and the Public Roads Administration, Federal Public Works Agency, 1944.

Altogether 10 consultant firms were involved, and the result was the *Transportation Plan—National Capital Region*, transmitted to Congress by the President on July 10, 1959.⁸

The 1959 plan recommended a major highway building program along with both rail and bus transit. It called for 248 miles of new freeways, 80 miles of which had not appeared on earlier plans, at a cost of \$1.8 billion. Another \$86 million was earmarked for express bus operations. A 33-mile rail system, half in subway, was estimated to cost \$476 million.

The proposed plan was the subject of Congressional hearings,⁹ where it met with generally favorable comment. However, the discussion contained elements of all the issues that would be argued over the coming decade: in particular, the relative appropriateness and feasibility of highway transportation versus rapid rail, the role of the Federal Government versus private enterprise in transit development, and the need to forge regional cooperation in transportation planning.

The Joint Committee decided to recommend a temporary Federal agency to develop plans and locate proposed routes for a comprehensive transportation system. The system thus designed would be owned by an interstate compact. The compact idea grew out of an effort that was underway at the time to create an interstate organization to coordinate transit regulatory functions. The National Capital Planning Act of 1960¹⁰ was subsequently passed and the National Capital Transportation Agency created to take on the transportation planning tasks.

⁸ A list of the studies included in the Mass Transportation Survey and the consultants who prepared them is:

General Development Plan (John T. Howard).

Economic Base Study (Council for Economic and Industry Research, Inc.).

Future Transportation Demand (William Smith & Associates).

Highway Transportation Engineering (DeLeuw, Cather & Co.).

Financing and Organization (Institute of Public Administration).

⁹ "Transportation Plan for the National Capital Region," Hearings before the Joint Committee on Washington Metropolitan Problems, 86th Congress, First Session, November 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, and 14, 1959.

¹⁰ Public Law 86-669, 86th Congress.

DECISION ON SYSTEM SELECTION

The basic configuration of Washington's regional rapid rail system was determined by National Capital Transportation Agency (NCTA), the Federal agency created by Congress to undertake transit planning in 1960. In short, NCTA proposed a regional transit system whose 25-mile core was authorized by Congress in 1965. Shortly afterwards, the jurisdictions of the region succeeded in formalizing an interstate compact organization. This organization, called the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA), began a technical evaluation process in early 1967 that led to the adoption, in March 1968, of the 98-mile Regional Metro System.

The National Capital Transportation Agency's November 1, 1962, Report to the President

The proposals of the NCTA generated far more intense controversy than the earlier findings of the Mass Transportation Survey. The debate was grounded in the ongoing argument over where and how many new freeways ought to be built to serve the District and surrounding areas. The NCTA report tended to polarize the discussion by coupling its proposal for an extensive rail network with recommendations that several key highways, including the Three Sisters Bridge across the Potomac, be dropped from area highway plans.

The fact that Congress also was considering national legislation to aid urban transit during this period brought overtones of national significance to the local debate and sharpened the antagonism of the arguments on both sides.

The NCTA work was principally a staff effort, although numerous consultants contributed over the agency's 5 years of operation. The most critical portions of the NCTA 1962 report (system planning, traffic forecasting, and engineering) were done in-house. Darwin Stolzenbach, a freeway opponent who had been a senior analyst with Operations Research, Inc. of Silver Spring, Md., guided the technical proceedings. Policy control was exerted by a five-member advisory board required by the 1960 Act. The chairman and dominating force of this group was Frederick Gutheim, a well-known architectural writer. As Staff Director to Congress' Joint Committee on Washington Metropolitan Problems during that body's brief existence from 1958 to 1960, Gutheim had turned out a series of planning reports on the NCR that were strongly transit-oriented and

representative of the then nascent wave of antifreeway sentiment.

NCTA was instructed to cooperate with all planning agencies in the region, but it pursued this cooperation in informal ways. Those agencies that disagreed with NCTA's findings generally charged that there had been little cooperation. In lieu of producing a plan that conformed to each of the often conflicting ideas of the various planning bodies in the region, NCTA focused on the new regional comprehensive plan published in 1961 by the NCPC and NCRCP. This *Plan for the Year 2000*, popularly known as the "Wedges and Corridors Plan," presented new population, employment, and growth data and, most importantly, changed the forecast for land use from the sprawl-like configuration that had been assumed for the 1959 plan to an organized radial network of growth corridors separated by low-growth and greenbelt "wedges,"

The data were plugged into a new traffic forecasting model and the findings used to support a regional transportation system featuring extensive rapid transit service. A seven-line system 83-miles long (a 50-mile increase over 1959) was recommended for a total cost of \$796 million, an increase of \$320 million over the 1959 plan. NCTA called for 74 fewer miles of highway than the 1959 plan. No cost estimate was made, as it was assumed that this mileage would be financed through the continuing highway funding mechanisms and would require no additional legislation. Proposed express bus operations total about half the transit mileage recommended in the 1959 report,

The reduction in highway cost was much greater than the increase in transit cost, so it was stated that the total cost of the 1962 plan was lower than that of the 1959 plan. Transit costs were minimized by having only two lines in city center, forming a loop around the Mall, by making only one crossing of the Potomac, and by maximizing use of rail rights-of-way.

Congress' Rejection of NCTA Proposals, 1963

The summary NCTA report transmitted to Congress in 1963 did not include the highway building restrictions, but the early debate nevertheless focused on the highway issues. Highway proponents suspected Stolzenbach's rail plan was intended to spearhead a nationwide campaign to substitute rapid rail for new highways. Rail advocates in turn accused the highway lobby—various automotive, trucking, cement, and related

interests-of choosing the Nation's capital to be "the focus of their drive toward automobilization of the country."¹¹

Stolzenbach's acquaintances say that he indeed sought to broaden the implications of the Washington freeway transit issue. He was politically identified with the prorail cause. Prior to becoming NCTA Director, Stolzenbach had been active in the Interfederation Council of the Greater Washington Area, a regional body concerned with a broad range of issues and representing 361¹² civic organizations. On behalf of the council, Stolzenbach testified that the 1959 plan "placed disproportionate emphasis on private auto transport . . . and failed to consider seriously public policies that would tend to increase the utility of mass transit relative to the automobile."¹²

Stolzenbach was well connected with antifreeway and prorail spokesmen. These were members of Washington's liberal Democratic community. Among them were Elizabeth Rowe, chairperson of NCPC and a vocal opponent of the freeway program; and Paul Sitton of the Department of Commerce, who crafted the Budget Bureau's statements of policy support for the NCTA plan and later helped Department of Transportation Secretary Alan Boyd reach a decision to block construction of one of the highway advocates' pet projects, the Three Sisters Bridge.

Stolzenbach's NCTA appointment reportedly had been lobbied by lawyer Charles Horsky, an important figure in the Kennedy White House who, as president of the Washington Housing Association, had criticized the 1959 *Transportation Plan* on the grounds that it gave inadequate emphasis to rapid transit.¹³

¹¹ See comments of Representative William Harsha for the pro-highway, antirail view and statements by Admiral Neill Phillips of the Committee of 100 on the Federal City for the opposite viewpoint, "Transit Program for the Nation's Capital Region," Hearing before Subcommittee No. 6 of the Committee on the District of Columbia, House of Representatives, 88th Congress, First Session, July 9, 10, 16, 18, 24, 25, 29, and 31, 1963.

¹² November 1959 Hearings before the Joint committee on Washington Metropolitan Problems, op. cit.

¹³ November 1959 Hearings before the Joint Transportation Committee, op. cit.

The Kennedy liberals were not the only group who supported transit in 1963. Downtown business interests believed a rail system was essential to shore up their substantial investments in the “old” Washington central business district between 15th and 7th Streets. New office construction in the downtown area had tapered off, and at the time no one foresaw the shift to the K Street-Connecticut Avenue area that has occurred since.

Although the highway issue was prominent in committee hearings, it was not the sole or even prime reason for the defeat of the rapid rail proposals in 1963. Congress was unwilling to consider so costly a system without any sign of financial commitment from local jurisdictions. It was decided to consider only the District of Columbia portions of the proposal until the interstate compact that was in the works was completed. However, for the time being, even the less costly 23-mile basic system presented for consideration was sent back to committee.

Congress’ chief complaint was that the bill threatened private transit enterprise and omitted language guaranteeing labor protection. The operators of the four private bus companies in the region, led by O. Roy Chalk of D. C. Transit, Inc., were vocal critics of the implication in the 1963 legislation that the rail system would eventually be operated by the public interstate compact, although the bill made no reference to the matter one way or the other. The only intensive lobbying on the bill was done by the bus company owners and the labor unions, who were concerned that labor would not be granted protection if the system was publicly operated.

The defeat of the enabling legislation occurred only 3 weeks after the Kennedy assassination, and this event may also have played a part in the bill’s demise. The President’s death threw protransit forces into disarray. Most of the protransit spokesmen also were deeply involved in other Kennedy programs and, in the aftermath of his sudden death, were absorbed in protecting these as well as the transit issue. As a result, the early momentum in favor of the proposal was diffused. Interestingly, Kennedy’s death also brought an end to a compromise he had been engineering on the location of the controversial Three Sisters Bridge. Years later, in 1968 that still-unresolved issue would stand in the way of the construction of the adopted regional rail system.

Congressional Authorization of the Basic Metro System, 1965

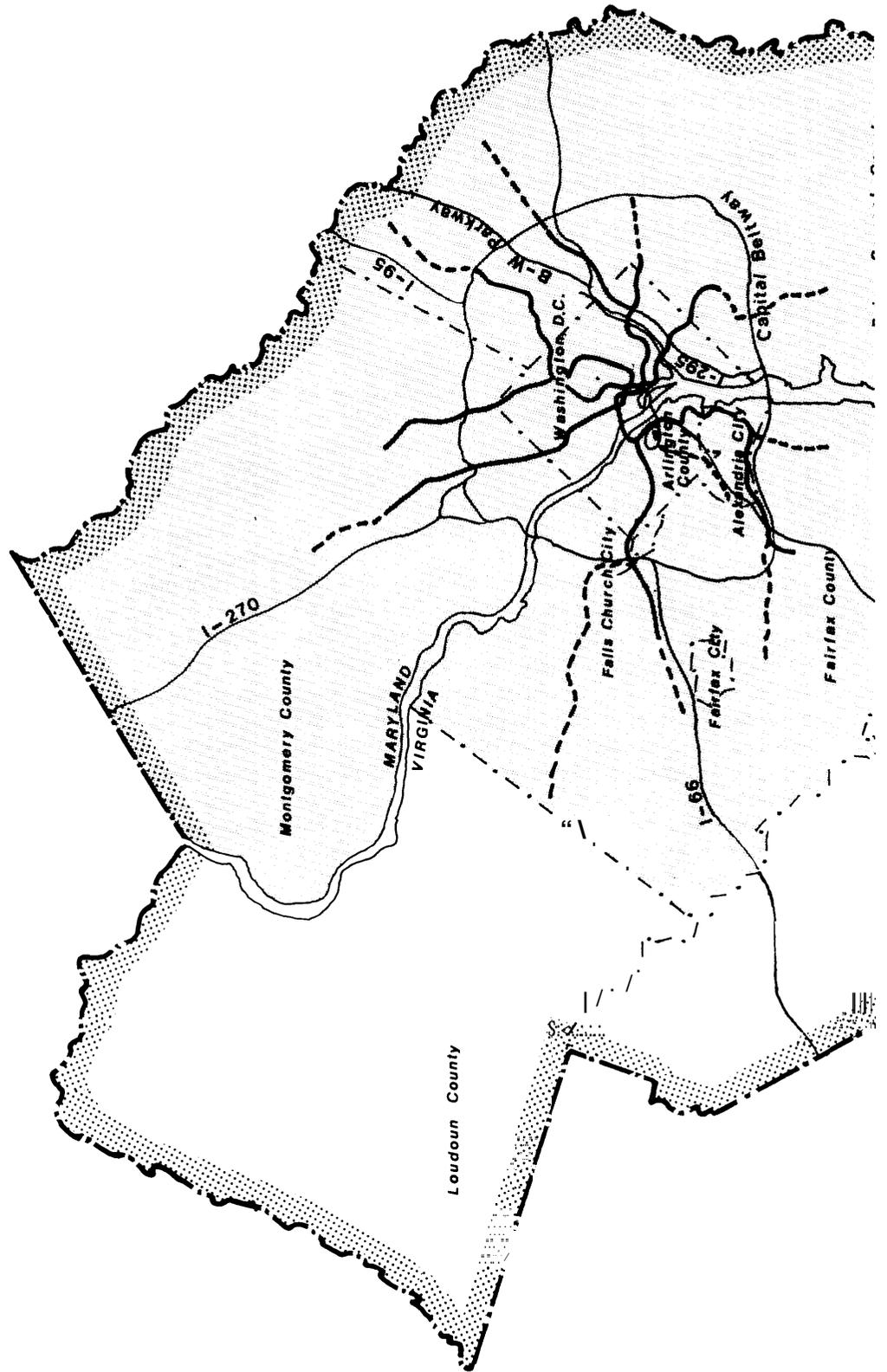
The plan NCTA brought to Congress, 18 months after the 1963 defeat, proposed a similar 25-mile rail system in the District of Columbia extending to the Pentagon in Arlington. It would cost an additional \$30 million (total \$431 million) and included 2 additional miles (total 25 miles, 13 in subway). The planning was headed by NCTA’s new director, Walter McCarter. McCarter was a more moderate personality than Stolzenbach and was well respected as a transit expert with 43 years of experience in Cleveland, Chicago, and Milwaukee. The 1965 proposal reduced the proportion of Federal investment in the system (and increased the relative share of the District). It also stipulated that the rail facilities could be operated only by private concerns, and it incorporated labor protection provisions that had been written into the Urban Mass Transportation Act of 1964.

Because the 1965 proposal directly remedied the shortcomings identified in 1963, because the new NCTA director was a more effective politician¹⁴ because the freeway controversy had been isolated from the transit planning agency to other forums, and because the interstate compact and eventual local financial support for the remainder of the system was near at hand, the rail measure passed Congress in 1965 and was enacted into law. Dissenters were concerned chiefly with what they alleged to be overcommitment by the Federal Government to a local system.

Adoption of the Regional Metro System, March 1968

The Federal expression of commitment to a basic rail system gave a boost to the effort to create an interstate compact agency to plan the system’s regional extensions. On November 6, 1966, President Johnson signed legislation authorizing the District to participate in an interstate transit authority, and by the end of the month Maryland and Virginia had ratified the compact. The Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) officially began to function in October 1967, when NCTA expired and its 30 staff people transferred to WMATA.

¹⁴ McCarter represented NCTA on the NCPC Board and consistently voted against the majority and in favor of the package of D.C. freeways that continued to be the focus of controversy.



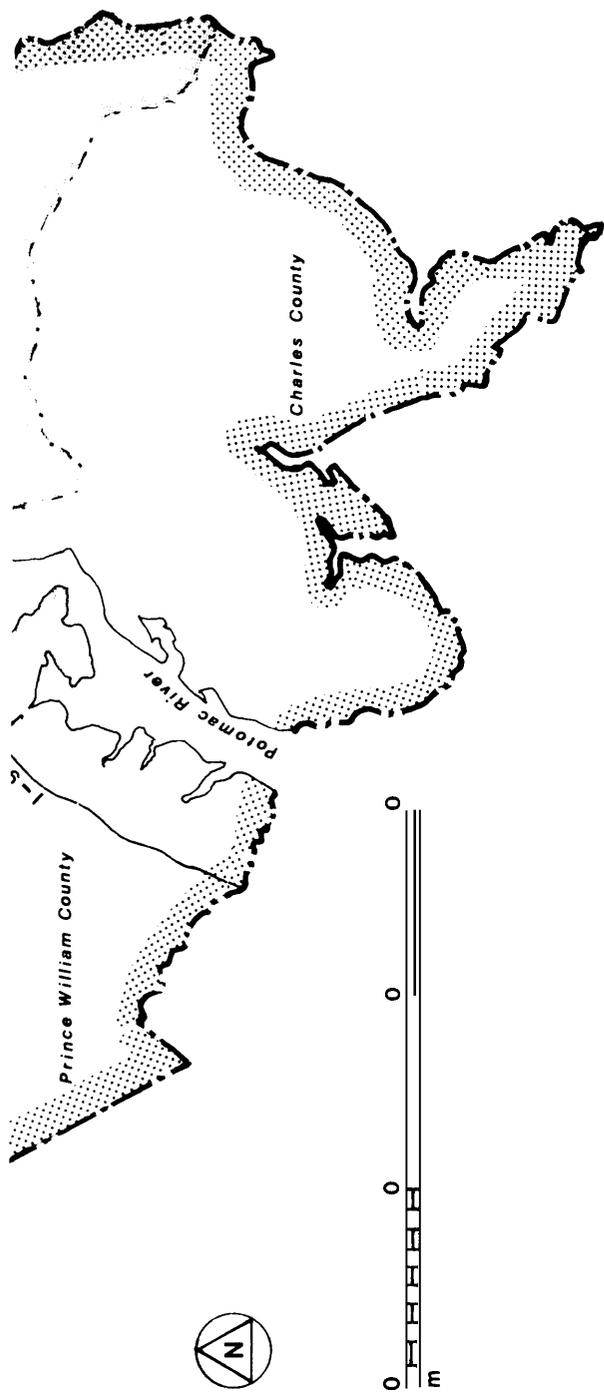
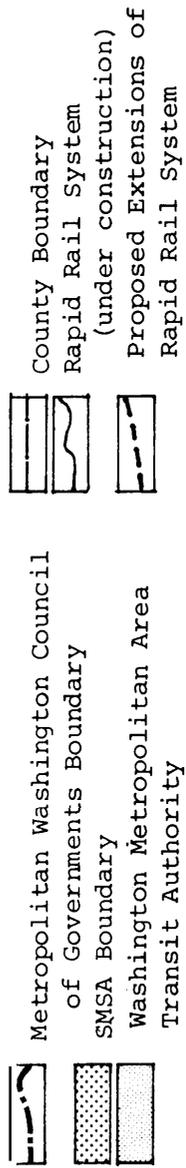


FIGURE 1: WASHINGTON, D.C., METROPOLITAN AREA



A Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA) includes a center city (or cities), usually with a population of at least 50,000, plus adjacent counties or other political divisions that are economically and socially integrated with the central area.

Meanwhile, the embryonic WMATA organization had already begun the technical and political process of planning the regional system. The WMATA board (two members from each major jurisdiction in the region) and numerous representatives of the area's political subdivisions came together at 3 regional workshops at Airlie House during the year to discuss technical findings and give policy direction. A patchwork system evolved and subsequently was tested for patronage and modified to become the Proposed Regional System in December 1967.

The Proposed Regional System comprised 7 radiating lines continuing out from the authorized basic system. The basic system itself was amended by Congress in 1967 to add service to the new employment center in southwest Washington and to change the basic configuration downtown from a branching system to one with lines crossing over each other in order to increase service levels.

The Proposed Regional System was taken to a series of 11 public hearings in January 1968. Following the hearings some minor modifications were made in route alignment and station locations, and on March 1, 1968, the WMATA Board officially adopted the Regional Metro System.

DECISION TO CONSTRUCT

The decision to build the system was implied by both Congress' commitment to the basic system and by WMATA's adoption of the regional system. In fact, the adopted system plan has been characterized as a formality necessary to establish the more important regional commitment to a financial plan for the system's construction.

The 1962 plan was the first in the evolution of the Metro system to apportion financing responsibilities. However, as early as 1959 Elmer Staats, Deputy Director of the President's Bureau of the Budget, had expressed Federal willingness to undertake a portion of the financial responsibility. In 1963 he testified that Congress should bear two-thirds of the cost, the same formula under discussion at the time for the Federal transit support activities nationwide. Congress adhered to the two-thirds formula in 1965 (it was eventually adopted for UMTA support as well), and the two-thirds formula formed the basis of the financial plan for the 1968 system.

It was assumed from the beginning that there would be Federal financial support for the rail system. This was one of the principal reasons behind the willingness of local governments to give consideration, and eventually their commitment, to the transit idea. An equally important aspect of the financial commitment was the assumption from the beginning that future operating revenue would pay back to the bond debt. The voters from the five Washington area jurisdictions that held bond referenda in November 1968 endorsed Metro by an average 71.4 percent ratio, believing the system would operate at a profit. (The other jurisdictions were not required by local regulations to hold bond votes.) By the time the bonds were to be sold, however, creditors required them to be backed by a Federal guarantee, which was granted by Congress in 1972.

WMATA first formally included a construction allocation in its budget for fiscal year 1969 and set groundbreaking for October 1968. However, the continuing battle in other agencies over construction of certain interstate highways played a role in delaying the groundbreaking until December 1969. The man behind the budget delay was Congressman William Natcher, Chairman of the District of Columbia Subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee. In 1966, Mr. Natcher said he would withhold his committee's recommendation from WMATA budget items until freeway construction, then curtailed through actions of the NCPC, was given a green light. Mr. Natcher was not opposed to Metro per se but was concerned over cost escalations and time delays in completing the interstate system through the District region. The green light came later in 1966, and Mr. Natcher approved the rapid rail budget; but subsequently the freeway activities were curbed once again. The situation was still unresolved in spring of 1968, and Mr. Natcher did withhold his approval of WMATA's money that year. The House supported him. Under this pressure the D.C. City Council voted in August 1969 to release the freeway money and Mr. Natcher agreed to free up money for Metro. Groundbreaking occurred December 9. That same day President Nixon signed into law Federal authorization of the entire **98-mile** Regional Metro System.

Decision To Continue Construction

At present the Metro planners, local jurisdictions contributing to its financing, and the Federal Government face a difficult decision whether to

complete the 98-mile system or cut it short. The source of the dilemma is the dramatic rise in the estimated total construction cost. It is complicated by increasing public criticism of Metro.

To be sure, the great majority of the public appears to support the regional rail system and to advocate its completion.¹⁵ However, more and more complaints are being voiced as construction progresses from the downtown and into residential areas where people are directly affected.

The growing dissatisfaction with Metro has three causes. First, people have tended to assume subways will have no undesired effects on the neighborhoods they serve. They are surprised and often angered to find that Metro can stimulate traffic and growth in their neighborhoods and destroy homes and businesses—just like the highways Metro has replaced. Secondly, many citizens have come to feel that WMATA planners over the years have purposefully avoided informing them about these impacts and are now giving them little opportunity, short of confrontation politics, for resolving them. Thirdly, some people, particularly from inner city black neighborhoods, feel they are helping pay for a system that will serve others and not them.

The recurring increases in the cost of building the system are also threatening Metro's support. By late 1970, estimates had escalated from the original \$2.5 billion to \$3 billion, and the most recent announcement sets the final figure at \$4.5 billion. WMATA has submitted a request to OMB and Congress for a retroactive change in the Federal-local share from 2 to 1 to 4 to 1, in accordance with UMTA's capital grant program levels. The additional Federal share (\$1.25 billion) would increase by \$135 million. However, the Federal Government is expected to reject the plan.

With the funding situation thus unresolved, Congressman John McFall has requested the Department of Transportation to study several alternative transit modes at the as yet undesignated extremities of the Metro system. UMTA and DOT have replied that they are willing to fund such a study if it is undertaken by the local agencies, but that they do not wish to conduct it themselves. Negotiations began in the spring of 1975 between the WMATA staff, the staff of the Transportation

Planning Board, and UMTA with respect to such a study, which would look at alternative modes for Metro's extensions as well as raise the question of whether or not the full system should be completed.

Any talk about truncating the system is greeted with trepidation by WMATA board members and other agencies in the region because changes would require adjustments in the financing plan. Thus far the suburban jurisdictions have plugged proportionally more money into the system than they have been given back in terms of segments under construction. Yet the politicians and political observers in the area seem to agree that new bond issues would be defeated at the polls. WMATA has been unsuccessful in getting Congress to take the lead in obtaining new financing for Metro.

As the debate intensified, in June 1975, the President appointed DOT Secretary William T. Coleman to take personal responsibility for coordinating administration policy on WMATA's requests for additional aid. Since then, a number of financing options have been discussed publicly, including the possibility of using interstate transfer money from deleted District of Columbia interstate highways and from northern Virginia's Interstate 66 to support the regional rail system. By mid-July DOT produced an interim report that calculated that available highway money would not cover the requested Federal share of Metro's projected cost overrun. Based on these numbers, UMTA officials began considering whether to apply the agency's newly articulated policy of encouraging metropolitan areas to build rail systems in incremental stages, as the demand for transit grows, in the Metro case. Under this policy, available funds would be spent to build links between the Metro segments under construction in order to put as many interconnected miles as possible into service as early as possible. WMATA argued that by shifting Metro construction priorities, UMTA's approach would delay completion of the full system 4 years until 1985 and hike costs to nearly \$5 billion.

UMTA backed off its speculations about applying the incrementalist policy to Metro within a week after the discussion was reported publicly. On September 4, 1975, UMTA issued a statement that it had underestimated the highway funds and that the potentially available supply appeared to be sufficient to complete at least a fully interconnected basic system.

¹⁵ See "Metro is Coming! Metro is Coming!" by Charles Conconi, *The Washingtonian*, May 1975.

As of this writing, the controversy continues over how completion of the Metro system should be financed. Although last spring observers were predicting a decision by the end of the year, from the present vantage point no clear resolution is in sight.

