

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
ADVISORY NEIGHBORHOOD COMMISSION 3A



May 16, 2023

Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority
300 7th Street SW
Washington, DC 20024

Via email

RE: Request for Comments on Better Bus Initiative
Preliminary Draft of “Visionary Network” Map

In late April WMATA circulated a preliminary map of what it called a “Visionary Network” of bus services for the future, as part of its “Better Bus” Initiative. Through June 5, WMATA is asking the public to submit feedback on the map and whether it would or would not meet people’s needs and interests, based on a series of guiding principles. In fall 2022, WMATA had also asked for input on what people want and appreciate in their bus services. The Commission has reviewed the map of bus lines in the draft “Visionary Network” map and also read comments from numerous residents in and around ANC 3A who would be affected by a change to the bus network.

Based on our analysis and contacts with constituents about the “Visionary Network,” we believe that if the preliminary map were in effect, many of our constituents and other prospective bus riders in the area we serve would lose important bus services that they now have and want, for the near and longer term future. This is a concern that our Commission shares with other ANCs in Ward 3 and surrounding areas. In its current form, the “Visionary Map” does not represent “better bus service” for most of our constituents and their community.

The map would call for consolidating more routes on major corridors and reducing the number of routes devoted to serving riders in local neighborhood. The stated intention is to increase the number of people within walking distance of frequent bus service. But for our area, the result would be loss of key routes and services throughout communities in the District of Columbia west of Rock Creek Park where people are living and working, especially on streets off the main arterials of Wisconsin and Massachusetts Avenue.

We strongly urge WMATA to:

- (1) reach out to more current riders, using a wider means of communications including additional in-person listening sessions in the communities that would be most affected in our area, as well as mail, phone, email, and other means of submitting comments. We understand that other ANCs in Ward 3 are requesting that WMATA extend the comment period for this phase of the Better Bus outreach process from June 5 to July 7 (at least 30 days) to allow Commissioners to hear from more constituents. We have also discussed with our Councilmember, Matt Frumin, the importance of working together on an area-wide task force to jointly assess the needs for Metrobus service and make suggestions for changes in the “Visionary Network” that would better serve all affected ANCs and our area as a whole;
- (2) consider the specific concerns of our residents (see attached as well as online comments on the interactive maps provided on the Better Bus web pages), which make clear why the bus network in the draft “Visionary Map” has received a negative reaction from so many local bus riders and residents.

Advisory Neighborhood Commissioners (January 1, 2023–December 31, 2024)

3A01

Thaddeus Bradley-Lewis

3A02

Judy Havemann

3A03

Hans Miller

3A04

Jeremy Del Moral

Website: www.anc3a.org

3A05

Ann Lane Mladinov

We do not want current riders and prospective future riders to face the loss of vital bus services because a team of analysts does not recognize their needs and has a different concept of what would seem more logical for a bus system to look like on a map.

Neither the ANC's nor the people have been shown the data on ridership, projected future demand, operating costs, or alternative options that the Better Bus team may have been considering. We agree with our colleagues in ANC's surrounding us, west of Rock Creek Park: Far more community engagement, public outreach, listening, data sharing, informed analysis, and consultation with local leaders and decisionmakers must be undertaken for WMATA to develop the outline of a future Metrobus network that will meet public needs and satisfy the description of "better bus service." We look forward to seeing that process go forward with and for our neighborhoods and constituents, and we hope that our Commission can participate with WMATA in making that happen.

In the meantime, it is very important that WMATA must not eliminate Metrobus routes and services that are now operated, used, and needed by current customers and are part of the vital system of transportation services that increasing numbers of new riders can consider and use in the months and years to come. We include the 30-line services, the 96, the N2/N4/N6, M4 and D2 in that list. There are surely ways to improve service, make it more reliable and accommodating and understandable for the full range of customers. Hasty cuts with too little dialogue and consideration of the consequences are not the way to arrive at a high quality transit system for the future.

The District and the entire region are still developing new patterns of travel as well as work and other activities that will function effectively as the nation and world emerge from the pandemic. This is not a time to make dramatic changes to a transit network that is the foundation for creating options people will be able to use in the future. Once transit services are eliminated, we know how difficult it is to get them restored, even when the data supporting them may be clear and compelling.

WMATA should be investing in the future of public transportation instead of cutting back its network and services. The District's stated goal of reducing dependency on personal vehicle use will never be realized if transit and in our case Metrobuses aren't available to get people where they need to go. If our regional transit system does not serve the well settled neighborhoods around the edges of the District where there is no convenient Metrorail service, there would be no reasonable public transit options for a substantial proportion of the population. The hills and valleys and often narrow streets may not fit a neat street grid for bus service, but they are a reality of the geography. Metrorail, the transportation system as a whole, and the fabric of the regional economy cannot work without an effective network of local buses. All of us suffer if we lose this key element of our transportation and environmental future.

In summary, our Commission requests that WMATA give weight to the concerns of residents and other stakeholders, devote substantially more time and attention to reviewing the needs and interests of local communities and constituents, and reassess the options for providing bus service to the area before finalizing the future bus map, in order to avoid neglecting or significantly underserving current and prospective riders. Our Commission and our community would like to continue to work with WMATA and local leaders in developing a future bus network that provides safe, effective public transit to serve our residents, workers, businesses, institutions and communities. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Thaddeus Bradley-Lewis', with a stylized, cursive script.

Thaddeus Bradley-Lewis
Chair

This letter was approved by the Commission by a vote of 4-0 at a duly-noticed public meeting at which a quorum was participating. (Three of the five Commissioners constitute a quorum.) By this vote, the Commission also designated the Chair to represent the ANC on this matter.

DETAILS OF BUS SERVICES AND NEEDS OF ANC 3A

ANC 3A was established to serve a densely settled area in the middle of Ward 3, including portions of Cathedral Heights, Cathedral Commons, McLean Gardens, City Ridge, and north Cleveland Park that are located near Wisconsin Avenue as well as areas in Cathedral Heights, Wesley Heights/Westover Place, Berkshire-Greenbriar and Ward Circle along Massachusetts Avenue, and Nebraska Avenue from Ward Circle to south Tenley Circle, none of which are directly served by Metro.

Our area depends on:

- the 30-series high-frequency buses operating on Wisconsin Avenue
- N2, N4 and N6 running along Massachusetts Avenue between Friendship Heights and Dupont Circle-Farragut Square, including the Idaho/Cathedral/New Mexico/Nebraska loop
- M4 running between Tenleytown and Sibley Hospital
- H4 buses running between Tenleytown via Wisconsin Avenue to Porter Street east to Brookland
- 96 running from Tenley Circle through our neighborhood and on to Woodley Park, Adams Morgan, the U Street corridor, Union Station, Stadium-Armory and Capitol Heights
- D2 between North Glover Park-Cathedral Heights to Dupont Circle

Our Commission area has a very high proportion of apartment buildings and condominiums, in addition to some row houses and a few blocks of detached and semi-detached homes. Many of the apartments and condominiums are on the major arterials of Wisconsin and Massachusetts Avenue, but the high density residences extend along Cathedral Avenue and into the interior of the neighborhoods. As in many neighborhoods in the District, the streets are narrow, there is very little off-street parking such as in alleys, parking is difficult, and many residents do not have cars. The population includes many residents who are over 65, people with disabilities, families with young children, young professionals, and college or graduate students. The U.S. Census also shows that the average household income is lower than in most other areas of Ward 3, and the share of people of color is higher. We have some economical housing and the businesses and residential development also provide jobs for essential workers, both from this area and across the region. That means the Metrobus routes are serving a broad population who currently need and are going to continue to need public transit. Additional residential and commercial development is already underway and planned, which will increase the demand and importance of frequent and reliable bus service.

The spatial patterns we see in the Washington region, including the location of commercial development and decisions on where to live and work, were not based on analysis of how far apart analysts believe transit lines should be or what the most ideal transit map would look like. They were based on factors of history, geography, economic conditions, and public and private sector development actions; family and household situations, finances, job options; taxes and other laws and regulations; tastes and preferences; and random occurrences that would be difficult to model or predict. The region we see is the result of decades of decisions by individuals, households, businesses and institutions, as well as federal, state, and local government. The patterns may not seem “rational” or “logical,” but that is not uncommon with the spatial structure of most metropolitan areas. Bus systems cannot entirely reshape the communities they serve; their job is not to dictate where people go, but to make increasing numbers of movements possible by public transit that is clean, safe, reliable and efficient, and serves as an alternative to using private motor vehicles.

The preliminary draft “Visionary Network” map of Metrobus routes serving our area would have numerous detrimental effects.

It is important to start with the role played by current Metrobus services to evaluate future options:

- service on the Priority Corridor of Wisconsin Avenue,
- service along Massachusetts Avenue and adjoining areas currently reached by N2, N4, and N6
- service from Cathedral Commons, McLean Gardens, and Cathedral Heights on the 96 to Woodley Metro and beyond
- frequent and direct service between North Glover Park and other interior blocks of that neighborhood and Dupont Circle Metro now provided by the D2.
- service to Friendship Heights and to Dupont Circle from Cathedral Avenue between Idaho Avenue and Glover Archbold Park and New Mexico Avenue
- all service on Western Avenue in NW Washington, DC
- convenient service between Knollwood/Barnaby Woods and Chevy Chase/Friendship Heights

1. Wisconsin Avenue

The “Visionary Network” map would reduce the number of 30-series bus routes to just one route (DC100) all the way down Wisconsin Avenue, and would remove the one-bus option for getting to and from Potomac Park/State Department. It could be a major benefit to have service every 5 minutes on Wisconsin, with service 7 days a week and through the night. However, the DC100 would threaten the reliability of bus service on Wisconsin by stretching the northern end of the route beyond Friendship Heights into Bethesda. This is one of the Priority Transit Corridors in the District, and the most heavily traveled Metrobus route in the area, serving some of the most dense residential and commercial areas west of Rock Creek Park, so very frequent, reliable, efficient service is essential to support the community, local economy, quality of life and environment. Increasing frequency and reliability is vital today and into the future as transit becomes more important to residents, workers, businesses and communities.

2. Cathedral Avenue loop (Cathedral Avenue between Idaho Avenue, Glover-Archbold Park, and New Mexico Avenue) and Massachusetts Avenue between AU/Ward Circle and Westmoreland Circle
On the “Visionary Network” map, these locations would no longer have direct one-bus access to Friendship Heights, or to Dupont Circle and Farragut Square, which are prime sites for workplaces downtown, restaurants, museums, and other tourist sites, and an important connection point for other buses. Anyone going to and from points on Cathedral Avenue between New Mexico Avenue and Massachusetts Avenue would have only the low-frequency DC300 (described as running at least every 30 minutes) between Woodley Park Metro and Bethesda, which would severely curtail the transit options for commuters. To get a bus to Dupont Circle, people in those blocks would have to walk to a point on Massachusetts Avenue somewhere southeast of Ward Circle.

For Spring Valley residents and workers, including those going to and from the large proposed Ladybird residential complex at 48th and Yuma, as well as students, visitors, and patients at the many clinics in that area, there would be no connection to the Metro at Friendship Heights other than by walking 14 to 16 blocks. Residents living along Western Avenue between Friendship Heights and Massachusetts Avenue would not have any transit service at all; they would have to walk to Massachusetts Avenue to catch a bus to Bethesda or to the southeast on Massachusetts, or walk to Friendship Heights for a bus or Metro.

3. Cathedral Commons, McLean Gardens, and Cathedral Heights to Woodley Park and beyond

People going to and from these locations currently can use the 96 service which runs on Wisconsin Avenue from Tenleytown to Woodley Road/National Cathedral on Wisconsin Avenue, southeast to Woodley Park Metro, and beyond to Adams Morgan, the U Street corridor, Union Station, Capitol Hill, Stadium Armory, and Capitol Heights. That is a bus that Cathedral Heights, McLean Gardens, and western Cathedral Heights residents use to get across town, from many locations that are not otherwise

served by transit. The Visionary Map eliminates that service and instead shows an east-west route across Cathedral Avenue (the DC300 mentioned above) that reaches hardly any of the current riders on the 96, and would not provide a good substitute for either the 96 or the N2/N6.

4. Other routes

- D2, which reaches the interior of Glover Park north to Cathedral Heights and provides a direct link to Dupont Circle and the most efficient route to Metro

Dupont Circle is a common origin-destination point for large numbers of workers and students and a center for shopping, restaurants, museums, institutions of learning, and other attractors for residents, visitors, and employees. Instead of the current D2 route, the preliminary “Visionary Network” map shows a new bus route (DC 201) that runs through nearly every other neighborhood in Ward 3 from the far northeast corner along Rock Creek Park through Tenleytown using the congested streets and intersections of Nebraska, Military Road, Wisconsin and Massachusetts Avenue to Wesley Heights, then winding through Glover Park to Reservoir Road and then west to MacArthur Boulevard, before turning south and then east along Canal Road and M Street in Georgetown, one of the most congested routes in the District, to Foggy Bottom Metro. The route may be designed to provide access to the new DCPS high school on MacArthur Boulevard but it would take people in our area on a long, circuitous route through a series of neighborhoods in Ward 3 without providing frequent, reliable, and efficient transportation to and from points that the large majority of riders in our area need to go, such as the Dupont Circle Metro.

- H4 cross-town buses from Tenleytown via Wisconsin Avenue to McClean Gardens and across Porter Street to Cleveland Park, Mount Pleasant, and Brookland, pairing with the H2 to serve these connections across the northern part of the District. Having more frequent service between our area along Wisconsin Avenue to Cleveland Park would be a benefit, though removal of the option of the H2 on the streets it serves (Veazey and Van Ness) would leave others with fewer transit options.

- M4 serving Nebraska Avenue between Tenley Circle and Sibley Hospital

The M4 offers an important link from Wisconsin Avenue and Tenleytown/AU Park to the hospital in Palisades, and offers service to riders to and from points in ANC 3A, between Tenley Circle and Ward Circle. But there are other aspects of the M4 service today and the similar service that would be offered on the DC200 or DC201. In the preliminary draft Visionary Network map. During COVID-19, WMATA extended M4 service northeast of Tenley Circle, as a form of “substitute service” to riders on the E6 route, which had been running between the Knollwood retirement community and Friendship Heights. In late 2019 and early 2020, threatened elimination of the E6 provoked strong and vocal protests from residents in upper Northwest along Oregon Avenue bordering Rock Creek Park, including Knollwood on Oregon Avenue and residential areas along Western Avenue in the Chevy Chase neighborhood. Their trips for groceries and other shopping, and the local community center and public library are all concentrated in Chevy Chase commercial area, and beyond that in nearby Friendship Heights where many residents shop and have medical appointments. Workers in Chevy Chase also made use of the E6 to get to their jobs. Those facts apparently were persuasive to the WMATA Board, which voted in March 2020 to maintain the E6 service—just as COVID-19 required all but a few public transit services to shut down.

The M4 is sometimes described as a substitute for the E6, but it does not provide an adequate replacement for the previous E6 Metrobus services for getting people to and from the points they want to reach between Barnaby Woods, Chevy Chase and Friendship Heights. In the preliminary Visionary Network map:

- DC 200 would run from Sibley Hospital to Nebraska Avenue and then follow Military Road across Rock Creek Park and on to Missouri Avenue to Fort Totten.
- DC 201 would follow the previous E6 route from Knollwood at the northeastern edge up to Western Avenue and then south west to Tenley Circle (not Chevy Chase Circle or Friendship Heights) on Nebraska as far as New Mexico Avenue, then wind down through Wesley Heights and Glover Park on New Mexico/Tunlaw/37th Street to Reservoir Road, west on Reservoir Road to MacArthur Boulevard where the new DCPS high school is planned to open in August 2023, around the high school to Canal Road, east on Canal Road to M Street through Georgetown to Foggy Bottom Metro.
- DC 203 would run from Friendship Heights across Military Road and Missouri Avenue, ending at Brookland Metro (not serving upper Chevy Chase/Barnaby Woods).
- DC 300 would run from Bethesda Metro south to Little Falls Parkway, west on River Road to Westbard and down Westbard to Massachusetts Avenue, southeast on Massachusetts to Nebraska Avenue, south on Nebraska to New Mexico Avenue, east on Cathedral Avenue to Massachusetts, east on Garfield Street to Cleveland Avenue, and southeast to Woodley Metro and east on Calvert Street across Rock Creek Park to the bus transfer point at the east end of the Duke Ellington Bridge.

From the perspective of most riders on existing Metrobus routes, it is hard to see the justification for offering the circuitous DC 201 running the entire length of the District west of Rock Creek Park as the only bus service to the interior blocks of Glover Park, and eliminating the direct service between that neighborhood and Dupont Circle, their closest Metro. There is no compelling reason to link Knollwood or Barnaby Woods to the new high school on MacArthur Boulevard, which is far out of boundary for local students, while failing to get riders to and from the grocery stores, medical offices, community center, library, and their closest Metro. The very long and circuitous routes in the preliminary draft Visionary Network map would take riders out of the way but not get them to and from places they want and need to go. Those routes do not fulfil the stated Better Bus objectives of more frequent and efficient bus service to and from places people are trying to go.

Those long circuitous routes also seem to violate the principles WMATA has used as the primary justification for eliminating services that our community and others across the District have used and depended on for decades, the 30N and 30S cross-town service between upper Northwest and points along Independence Avenue and Pennsylvania Avenue near the National Mall, Capitol Hill, southeast on Pennsylvania Avenue and across the Anacostia River to Naylor Road and Southern Avenue. District leaders and founders of WMATA made a commitment five decades ago when WMATA was being established, to maintain those vital bus connections between neighborhoods and people across the District. But WMATA Board members and staff went back on those commitments during COVID-19, eliminating the 30N and 30S because they said that long routes are inefficient, the buses get caught in congestion through the day, and cannot maintain a reliable schedule. The 31 and 33 buses are notorious for the same “bunching,” skipped buses and overall unreliability, even though the buses no longer operate across the Mall or across town. But in the meantime, residents, essential workers, students, shoppers, tourists, and others in our area are suffering the loss of important services that many of us used throughout previous decades to make important trips via public transit.