

Metro Lost \$400,000 a Day During the Federal Government Shutdown, Agency Says

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As of Friday, January 18, 2019, the government shutdown was in its 28th day, the longest in history. About a quarter of the government had been shut down and 800,000 federal employees had either been furloughed or were required to work without pay since December 22nd. There did not appear to be a resolution in sight, with congressional Democrats and the White House at an impasse over funding for a border wall as part of a spending bill.

The Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) lost \$400,000 in fare and parking revenue for every weekday of the shutdown, according to a letter Sen. Mark Warner (D-VA) shared on Twitter.

In addition to the revenue losses, the government shutdown left WMATA with \$33 million in unreimbursed expenses. The letter Warner shared from transit authority officials stated that, if the shutdown continued through the end of January, WMATA expects the federal funding gap to balloon to an estimated \$50 million.

Metro's preliminary analysis estimated that the shutdown resulted in a 16 percent loss in average weekday Metrorail ridership and an 8 percent loss in average MetroBus ridership. The losses worsened as the shutdown stretched past January 21st because February SmartBenefits – the commuter benefit offered to federal workers to incentivize transit use – could not be distributed for the month.

Essential federal government employees who receive SmartBenefits were able to commute for free during the shutdown on some transit systems. However, most of these employees – who hadn't received a paycheck yet this year - will be in for a shock when their personal credit cards are charged for commuting expenses in February. Most transit agencies in the region will refund any automatic charges, but that means those regular federal employee commuters may no longer be able to afford to ride public transit. SmartBenefits also covers monthly commuting costs for vanpools.

Additionally, the shutdown has put \$638 million in federal transit funding in jeopardy. If the prolonged shutdown of the Department of Transportation leads to delays in certifying the Washington Metrorail Safety Commission (WMSC) by the April 15, 2019 statutory deadline, the FTA indicates that it would be prohibited by law from issuing a total of \$638 million in FY2019 federal transit funding to all transit providers across the District of Columbia, Maryland and Virginia.

In a statement, the senators from Maryland and Virginia said the shutdown was "jeopardizing the health and stability of the Metro system."

So What? How Did the Government Shutdown Affect OMNIRIDE?

OMNIRIDE is no different from WMATA, we are also felt the effects of the Government shutdown. Our finance department reports that we are awaiting \$4.2 million in federal reimbursements. \$3.5 million of that is payment for six OMNIRIDE coach buses from MCI. MCI has been willing to work with us to

extend the payment that is due. These six buses have already been wrapped in our new OMNIRIDE logo, outfitted with all the required technology, and have been released into service.

OMNIRIDE also experienced a ridership loss during the Government shutdown. In January, ridership on the express routes was down almost 800 passengers per day compared to January 2018, for an average daily revenue loss of \$5,169. One uncertainty we still have is if employees will have their SmartBenefits available for February. Although the shutdown is over for now, SmartBenefits were to be provided to employees by January 21st.

OMNIRIDE also manages the Vanpool Alliance program. The program reports that passenger trips in December 2018 were the lowest for a December in four years at 101,939. This is despite having almost 200 more vans enrolled than December 2014. For December 2017, Vanpool Alliance reported 108,423 trips. Passenger trips were down almost 6,500 from December 2018.

For December 2018 Vanpool Alliance reported 802,422 revenue miles, whereas for December 2017 they reported 881,837 miles. An almost 80,000 miles drop, year on year. These miles, if reported in their totality, would represent a loss of about \$54,000 in program earnings.

Obviously it goes without saying that the shutdown affected the entire region including OMNIRIDE and our passengers. Should an event of this magnitude occur again, OMNIRIDE should consider lowering fares during government shutdowns to allow federal employees a cheap alternative to driving into work. OMNIRIDE should also consider allowing free travel on our Local and Metro Express bus routes. This could provide incentive to furloughed, non-essential federal employees to stay within the county to look for temporary work opportunities while a shutdown is in effect.