SPEAKING REMARKS

King County Council Mobility Committee Access Paratransit Briefing, May 2, 2018

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Good Afternoon. For the record, my name is Chrissy Russillo, and I am the managing director of King County's Paratransit Rideshare Operations program.

Thank you for inviting me here today to give an update on King County's Access paratransit program. Today, I am pleased to give you a quick overview of the Access program, and an update on the service enhancements that the program team has been making, and our progress toward securing new contract.

The Access program provide mobility to people with disabilities who cannot ride the bus or light-rail within King County. As required by the American with Disabilities Act, or ADA, our Access service is comparable to the bus and light rail service. In King County, we go above and beyond the ADA minimum in our service area and the hours of operation

King County has a robust paratransit program. Last year, we provided more than 950,000 ADA paratransit trips to more than 10,000 people. This is about 3,200 trips every weekday, and more than a 1,000 trip each Saturday and Sunday, to help people go to their medical appointments, their workplace, their place of worship, or to shop or socialize.

We currently provide this service through three contractors.

Paratransit is an expensive service. In fact, we currently have one of the nation's highest cost per trip. There are several factors contributing to this. Some are policy-related, such as the decision to go above the ADA minimum. Some are related to the costs associated with complying with comprehensive local labor laws. Others are outside of our control, like the fact that Seattle has some of the worst traffic in the nation.

That said, we continue to look for ways to contain costs without compromising service quality, including partnering with community organizations to provide lower-cost transportation options.

And, of course, we work to make our bus system as accessible as possible for all people including providing transit instruction for those that need it.

The Access program currently is in a process to enhance our service and to move toward a new contract beginning in 2019. This slides shows the steps in this process.

In the past year we have heard much feedback about our program, at the same time we were releasing a Request for Proposal, or RFP, for a new contract.

In early 2017, the King County Auditor's Office released a report which presented many recommendations to improve practices and service and ensure equitable access to the program.

We heard common issues from our customers: They were picked up too late, or their trip was too long, or they were dropped off too early and the doctor's office, for example, isn't open yet.

We heard similar concerns from the Community Advisory Group that we had formed.

During this time, we were releasing a Request for Proposal, or RFP, to obtain a new contract. In working with a national transportation consultant, we decided to go with a single service provider to gain better consistency and accountability across the program.

The RFP process presented a unique opportunity for the County to make changes to the Access program in response to the feedback we heard. The RFP incorporated recommendations from the Auditor as well as customer feedback though not to the satisfaction of some customers and advocates.

After we released the RFP, Access riders and other stakeholders communicated their disappointment that they were not more involved in the process of developing the RFP. They advocated for a more inclusive process, so the County could ensure that a new contract would support a higher quality service and be reflective of customers' needs.

At the direction of the King County Council, Metro paused the RFP process. We formed a workgroup of current Access riders and members of the paratransit advocacy community, as well as staff from the King County Council and the Executive's Office.

I want to recognize each member of the RFP workgroup, several who are here today, for their dedication to improving the Access program. We had 11 long meetings over 8 months, with homework between meetings. We had lively debates, and we all learned from each other. I think I can speak for the Metro team when I say it was an honor to hear directly from our customers and their advocates.

The workgroup members reminded us about the values the program should have – including respect, equity, reliability as examples. Metro and the Access program gained valuable insight from the customers' perspective which will only strengthen the program well into the future.

Staff from the Access program worked tirelessly to support this effort and incorporate input from the workgroup into the paused RFP.

As we looked to improve the program, we are taking steps to improve what we can under the current contract, and identifying what we need to improve in the future contract.

In the past year, we have responded to our customers and the audit in several areas:

- Service quality
- Accountability
- Customer focus
- Equity focus

I am especially proud that we have improved our on-time performance from 86% to 91%. The contract calls for a minimum standard of 90%. This means an additional 48,000 boarding's that were on time (500 riders).

We also created a tool so riders can learn estimated arrival time via phone or online.

We also hope this year to decrease the window which we drop people off for their appointments from 60 minutes to 30 minutes.

Innovation -- We are planning a pilot project this year to offer same-day, on-demand trips for our riders.

But many changes our customers have asked for require a new contract. The RFP workgroup that I mentioned earlier, as well as national consultants and our talented staff, worked collaboratively to identify many items to change in the new contract to improve the service.

This was a confidential process so we could maintain the competitive nature of our procurement process.

I am pleased to say the workgroup's work will have a significant impact on the amendments we are making to the RFP:

Higher standards for on-time performance. And expanding the definition of on-time performance to include both pick-up and drop-off windows … This inclusive workgroup process concluded with a range of suggestions on performance standards, all higher than what we currently have.

Stronger financial incentives and disincentives for:

- Cost of trip – semi-annual review
- On-time performance
- Onboard time
- Maintenance
- Customer service
- On-demand, same-day scheduling
- Online reservations and payment

The workgroup also asked that we emphasize our focus on offering a customer-centered service and our focus on equity and social justice. We have identified many ways to amend the RFP to include this, including:

- Additional training
- Satisfaction surveys after trip and annually
- Moving customer service in-house to Metro
- The new RFP also calls for a contract that supports flexibility for innovative programs

There are still areas where we do not have agreement, or people feel we didn't go far enough:

- Mentioned level of performance standards – range of on-time performance and other indicators
- Rural service outside where we do not have bus or light rail

Our staff is currently amending the current RFP to reflect most of the workgroup suggestions. Still under policy discussion are the specific performance standards as these will have a fiscal impact for years to come. All of the suggestions are higher than what we currently have.

Thanks to the workgroup and King County staff, I am confident the new contract is responsive to our customers and make Access a true mobility service.

To improve service as quickly as we can for our customers, we want to release the amended RFP in the next month if possible, so we can have a new contract in place in 2019. We have a commitment to serve our customers as well as possible, and we need the new contract to have higher standards and stronger accountability of our contractors.

The experience we have had over the past year has reminded us of the value of pausing to listen to our customers. We are all committed to delivering high quality service – and we cannot do this unless we are working in partnership with those who rely on our service.

To continue this partnership with our customers, we have launched an Access Task Force that we hope to continue to hold us accountable and help us improve the program. There are more than 20 riders and advocates who have volunteered to be on the Task Force, and we look forward to a continued partnership with them. Thank you. I look forward to hearing your questions.