FOOL DC TWICE

WHY D.C. MUST ABANDON PRIVATE-SECTOR CONTROL OF PUBLIC TRANSIT
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In recent years, local elected officials in the District of Columbia have launched efforts to create a publicly-funded, privately operated, multi-modal transit system. This has included the creation of the D.C. Circulator and D.C. Streetcar. Since their inception, both projects have been plagued by a multitude of problems: labor law abuses, safety standard violations, and repeated failures to meet promised ridership and service goals.

This report:

• details the history of these projects;
• analyzes their performance to date;
• traces their relationship to the regional transit system, and;
• recommends basic principles that should guide further efforts to expand transit options in the District.

In particular, Fool D.C. Twice explores:

• how local business interests drove the creation of the highly-subsidized D.C. Circulator to primarily serve a “premium” ridership;
• repeated failures by the D.C. Circulator’s operating contractor, First Transit, to maintain basic urban transit safety and labor standards while avoiding government oversight;
• the hundreds of millions of transit dollars wasted on poor planning and poorer construction of the D.C. Streetcar and fruitless efforts by its operating contractor to prevent unionization, and;
• how D.C. government leaders undermined regional transit development by attempting to assume control of and privatize all transit service within the District.

We encourage elected officials and appointees at public transportation agencies in the District of Columbia and across the country to prioritize the public good before embracing the elusive solutions promised by public-private partnerships. Specifically, we recommend that public officials commit to three basic principles:

1. Transit expansion should focus on improving service for all communities, not providing specialized service to “premium” clientele.
2. Transit spending should be directed toward the mobility needs of residents, especially those who lack transit access, rather than the demands of regional developers.
3. Public transit should be publicly maintained and operated, not subject to profitability for contractors.

We are confident that the experiences of de-regionalization and privatization in Washington, D.C. are not unique to the District. Instead, we believe they offer important lessons to be learned for transit agencies across the country.
**Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.** This old proverb finds new meaning in the District of Columbia, where well-intentioned local elected officials have twice been persuaded that private contractors could establish and operate local public transit systems without lowering passenger safety or labor standards. But why did public-private partnerships become so hip in the District, and how should D.C. leaders proceed now that these experiments have failed? In this report, the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) seeks to answer those critical questions.

### INTRODUCTION

D.C. is in the midst of an economic boom. Employment is up, and property values are skyrocketing as redevelopment rapidly transforms wide swaths of the city. There has been an influx of young urban professionals seeking good jobs and the sort of services and cultural amenities that only major metropolitan areas provide. To safeguard the perceived gains of this demographic shift, the District has sought to seize more local control of one of its new populations' most sought-after urban benefits: a robust public transportation system.

Alongside suburban Virginia and Maryland, D.C. has been served by the regional Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) since 1967. As the entire region's population shifted in the last two decades, however, cooperation gave way to competition, with each WMATA jurisdiction seeking to free itself from the burden of negotiating local transit services with one another. The result? Years of underinvestment in the regional system have led to a devastating maintenance backlog, cascading service failures, limited service expansion, and several high-profile fatalities of transit riders and workers.\(^1\) This backslide has sapped public confidence in mass transit, contributing to an historic ridership decline.\(^2\)

D.C., like its neighbors in Virginia and Maryland, has contributed to the neglect of WMATA, which still serves as the region's central nervous system. Instead of championing a new era of regionalism and public transit policy, the District has focused on developing a parallel, locally-controlled, privately-operated transit system that benefits its newer and wealthier residents and the businesses and institutions that employ and serve them. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of transit workers and hundreds of thousands of riders who do not fit the preferred profile are seeing their livelihoods and lifelines erode.

The problems posed by privatization of transit were laid bare in recent years by the now infamous DC Streetcar. But long before the streetcar tracks were laid, the District had already started to pursue a form of stealth privatization of its bus system. Led by the presidents of two politically influential business improvement districts with aid from the District Department of Transportation (DDOT), a carefully branded and subsidized bus system, the DC Circulator, was created to compete with the District's already existing Metrobus system.

### THE DC CIRCULATOR IS CREATED

While the WMATA-provided MetroAccess paratransit service has been privately operated since its origin in the early 1990s, the first District-led reprivatization of transit service has been privately operated since its origin in the early 1990s, the first District-led reprivatization of transit service.

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dates back to 1997, when the National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC) issued a long-range vision for the city that included plans for “a supplementary transit system called a ‘circulator’ to carry tourists and commuters around the Core.” The DC Circulator, as it is now known, was envisioned to deliver routes between major national monuments, Arlington National Cemetery, the Mall, Georgetown, Union Station, the U.S. Capitol, and Anacostia.

In 1998, the Downtown DC Business Improvement District (Downtown BID) assembled a planning group to advance the Circulator idea along with NCPC, DDOT, and WMATA. The following year, the Downtown BID released a report, commissioned from Parsons Transportation Group, on the feasibility of a Downtown Circulator with two routes, one through downtown and one through the Monumental Core. Soon after the Downtown BID released its report, the Georgetown Partnership (the predecessor to the Georgetown BID) created its own low-cost private bus service. Known as the Blue Bus, the service was created to serve local commuters, especially those travelling outside rush hours. The Georgetown BID’s two routes, which were operated under contract by Yellow Transportation, were a big hit. The service was later replaced by the DC Circulator with the support of the Georgetown BID.

In July 2003, the Downtown BID, NCPC, DDOT and WMATA released a Circulator implementation plan. It proposed four low-fare routes with projected annual operating costs of $17 million, about 45 percent of which would come from fare box revenue paid by a projected 45,000 riders on an average weekday (16.3 million annually). D.C. and WMATA officials approved the creation of two routes—Union Station to Georgetown and the Convention Center to the southwest waterfront—beginning in 2005 with a fare of 50 cents per trip. The District provided funds to pay for the buses (distinctive models to be purchased from the Belgian company Van Hool NV) and for annual operating costs not covered by the BIDs.

By the time that service began in July 2005, the fare had been set at $1. It became public knowledge that operation of the Circulator had been contracted out to First Transit, with funding streams provided through DDOT. WMATA was to oversee the operating contract, and marketing was to be handled by DC Surface Transit Inc.

Who Does the Circulator Serve?

From the beginning, the Circulator project was conceived of as a premium service. Attempts were made early on to differentiate it from WMATA’s Metrobus service by a distinct color scheme and eye-grabbing visuals. Importantly, there was a desire to maneuver around WMATA’s unionized workforce, which Circulator boosters saw as a cause of poor customer service at Metrobus.

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4 Described in District of Columbia Downtown Circulator Implementation Plan (July 2003), pp.15-16.
6 District of Columbia Downtown Circulator Implementation Plan (July 2003).
They succeeded in all of these areas. They were able to brand the service in a completely distinct manner from Metrobus, thus distancing their service from the less politically popular WMATA-run service. They were also able to purchase distinctive-looking low-floor buses, avoiding Buy American requirements by using money acquired from a District settlement that was exempt from the regulations.\(^\text{11}\)

The new service quickly achieved a reputation as clean, reliable, and quick, thanks in no small part to its 10-minute headways. From the start, this made DDOT’s Circulator easily distinguishable from WMATA, though in many cases it directly duplicated routes already served by Metrobus.\(^\text{12}\)

More troubling than this difference in branding and perception was the difference in their service areas. Looking at a census tract breakdown of the areas served by the Circulator, it is striking how much whiter and wealthier they are when compared to the District’s overall population.\(^\text{13}\) The average census tract served by the Circulator is 15% whiter and 18% less black than the District population as a whole.\(^\text{14}\)

This service coverage has helped create a cycle of mutually reinforcing power. The decision to run the Circulator in areas with a wealthier, whiter population created a politically influential constituency for the service. This in turn has created pressure on local politicians to defend the service and expand it, even into neighborhoods that are already covered by the existing Metrobus network.

One especially illustrative example comes from Ward 2. Citizens in Ward 2 were active in campaigning for the K Street Circulator to turn up Wisconsin Avenue. They were successful in securing a temporary trial of that reroute.\(^\text{15}\)

DDOT, analyzing the effect of the detour on overall service, claimed the trial leg served only 2% of ridership despite accounting for 15% of the route’s cost.\(^\text{16}\) Accordingly, because of the high cost for relatively little benefit, the city planned to end the trial reroute of service and save $950,000. However, Ward 2 Councilmember Jack Evans and Mayor Adrian Fenty’s office, under pressure from their constituents, secured money to save the Wisconsin Avenue stretch. In Evans’ words, “The great outpouring of support from the Circulator ridership has once again ensured the continued service of this vital transportation option along the Wisconsin Avenue corridor.”\(^\text{17}\)

In other words, a politically active constituency managed to successfully pressure the District government to subsidize a premium service for a small number of people who were already served by existing transit. This was in spite of the fact that serving them reduced the effectiveness of the overall route.\(^\text{18}\) This stark example encapsulates the inequities of the Circulator system more broadly.

While the true costs of the system are often hidden from the public due to the low fare ($1 dollar for a Circulator ride versus $1.75 for a normal Metrobus

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\(^\text{13}\) Data on family income was obtained from the 2011-2015 ACS 5 year survey. Circulator routes were matched with the census tracts that they overlapped and compared with the averages for the D.C. population as a whole.

\(^\text{14}\) Data on race was obtained from the 2011-2015 ACS 5 year survey. Circulator routes were matched with the census tracts that they overlapped and compared with the averages for the D.C. population as a whole.

\(^\text{15}\) Good Jobs First (GJF) Interview with Joe Sternlieb.


Fool DC Twice: Why D.C. Must Abandon Private-Sector Control of Public Transit

Amalgamated Transit Union

ride), they are worth considering. The Circulator’s farebox recovery ratio has steadily declined from a peak of 24% in 2011, to 23% in 2012, 20% in 201319, and 19% in 201420. In comparison, the Metrobus farebox recovery ratio was 26% in FY 2011, 26% in FY 2012, 26% in FY 2013, and 25% in FY 2014.21 Considering that the Circulator serves D.C.’s urban core, while Metrobus serves a much broader area, these numbers are particularly surprising. This low farebox recovery necessitates high direct subsidies to keep the system solvent.

The end result is that costs are shifted away from the Circulator's riders and toward District taxpayers as a whole, most of whom derive no direct or indirect benefit from the service. The general public is subsidizing a service designed to serve the District’s whiter, wealthier residents and tourists.

Even setting aside the issues of rider equity and disproportionate political influence, of greater concern is the service’s overall lack of reliability. Its lackluster ridership, abysmal labor standards, and poor safety record bear this out.

The Circulator's Performance

The 2003 Circulator implementation plan projected that the four routes it was proposing would have a combined annual ridership of more than 16 million passengers. The actual Circulator system, which began with two routes in 2005 and now has six routes, has never come close to reaching that figure. While it experienced significant growth, doubling from just over 2 million passengers in 2006 to 5.8 million in 2011, that trend has reversed. It has declined to 5.7 million in 2013 and 5.1 million by 2014.22

Along with the growth in ridership and route expansion, there has been a substantial rise in operating costs. In its first full year of operation, the Circulator system cost $5.3 million. By 2011, that had more than tripled to $15.9 million. On a cost-per-rider basis, the Circulator went from $2.54 its first year to $2.75 in 2011 (after reaching $2.87 in 2010).

Despite these growing costs, the Circulator’s performance leaves much to be desired, as was confirmed by a recently published audit performed by the Transit Resource Center (TRC). TRC was brought in by DDOT to examine the system’s Van Hool fleet (the low floor buses bought when the service first began).23

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The audit involved: 1) physical examination of 42 of the 49 Van Hool buses (7 were out for repairs and could not be examined); 2) testing of essential drivetrain fluids; 3) examination of related maintenance and inspection records; and 4) verification of workers’ qualifications.

The inspection revealed an “exceptionally high number of defects,” a total of 924 or an average of 22 defects per bus. Of these, 120 (an average of 2.9 per bus) were “A” level serious safety defects that should have rendered a vehicle unfit for service until repairs were completed. Of the 42 Van Hool buses inspected, 40 of them (95% of the fleet) had at least one “A” level defect, leaving only two fit for service.

To emphasize the extraordinary nature of the maintenance situation at the Circulator, the TRC report compared their findings with those of two other maintenance audits they had done of other transit providers. Their inspections of the Potomac and Rappahannock Transportation Commission (PRTC) in Woodbridge, Virginia, which provides city and commuter bus services and is also operated by First Transit found about three defects per bus, and 0.08 “A” defects per bus on average. Similarly, inspections conducted by TRC for the Capital District Transportation Authority (CDTA), in Albany, New York, which only provides city-bus service found an average of only about five defects per bus, and 0.4 “A” defects per bus. To quote the report’s own conclusion “Any inspection that reveals an average of nearly three “A” defects per bus is an indication that the maintenance program is not effective and needs immediate attention.”

This failure was confirmed by an examination of records associated with the Circulator’s preventative maintenance inspections (PMI). The TRC reviewed the PMI sheets for the last three PMIs done on 12 randomly selected buses, and looked at whether any defects were repeated from one PMI to the next. The goal was to see whether First Transit had a process in place to distinguish between those defects identified and repaired during the PMI from those scheduled for repair at a later date, and whether they actually followed up and repaired the defects identified during the previous PMI.

The review of the PMI checklists found that in the vast majority of cases technicians were simply checking off each inspection item as being satisfactory with little to no elaboration regarding any of the defects existing on the buses. Given the sheer number of defects identified by TRC in their own inspections, there should have been many more defects noted, and explanations regarding the nature of those defects written up as part of the PMI process.

The result of the ineffective detection program was the gradual accumulation of defects over time, resulting in the unusually high number of total defects in the fleet. The report further notes that this could have led to the reliability problems suffered by the Van Hool fleet during revenue service.

The TRC examined the road call histories for the fleet and found that it suffered about 10-20 road calls per month, approximately 180 annually. The predominate cause of the failures found almost every month were coolant leaks, air leaks, engine shut downs, and

door related problems. These overlap significantly with the categories that TRC found had the highest number of defects.

As shown by the report, this remarkable failure of detection and maintenance led to an unusually high number of road calls. It also resulted in the deployment of unsafe vehicles on D.C.’s roads, endangering the safety of both riders and workers. This public safety crisis was only revealed after an intense campaign in 2016 by the Circulator’s employees, especially bus operators represented by ATU Local 1764. Fortunately, the signing of a collective bargaining agreement (CBA) between First Transit and ATU 1764 secured unprecedented safety language that, for the first time, grants bus operators the explicit right to refuse to drive unsafe vehicles.

In addition to the above safety gains, the most recent CBA for Circulator workers also went a long way towards addressing the two-tier wage system that the Circulator had introduced to the District. Before the latest CBA, the top rate a Circulator operator earned was $23.47 per hour, significantly lower than the WMATA top operator wage rate of $31.69 per hour. To put the Circulator number into perspective, according to the MIT Living Wage Calculator, a minimum of $30.81 per hour is needed to sustain a single parent and child in the District.

This disparity is especially notable given that Circulator operators perform essentially the same service as Metrobus operators within the same market (some routes even running parallel to existing Metrobus routes), just under a separate branding. The most recent CBA raises their top rate to $31.69 per hour by 2018. They are now on track to achieve wage parity with WMATA operators, though benefit parity is still elusive.

By raising wages, the union provided a valuable public service. With Circulator operators properly compensated for their work at rates comparable to that of their Metrobus counterparts, the union enabled the service to attract and retain qualified employees.

Unfortunately, the mistakes made in the development of the Circulator were seemingly dismissed as the District sought to develop its own rail system. Since at least the Mayoral administration of Vincent Gray, the District government has openly sought to establish a private streetcar to complement its private Circulator service.

Most of WMATA’s Metrobus service within the District, D.C.’s own Circulator, and a soon-to-be-built DC Streetcar would be turned over to a private entity to design, build, and operate
THE DC STREETCAR COMES TO LIFE

In 2012, DDOT released an RFI that laid out a plan for a single non-regional, multi-modal, privately-run transit system. Though ostensibly looking for contractors to build and operate a new streetcar system, the RFI also proposed privatizing all of WMATA’s non-regional bus routes. It was dubbed the “Integrated Premium Transit System Plan.”

In essence, the plan would have reduced WMATA to a heavy rail-only system with a few multi-jurisdictional bus lines. Most of WMATA’s Metrobus service within the District, D.C.’s own Circulator, and a soon-to-be-built DC Streetcar would be turned over to a private entity to design, build, and operate. Under the terms of the plan, this system would remain in private hands for at least 30 years. While the proposal has faded from view after Gray’s mayoral fortunes declined, his successor, Mayor Muriel Bowser, has not dismissed it from consideration.

To the contrary, while Mayor Bowser may no longer speak of the Gray Administration’s 37-mile streetcar system, she appointed a new DDOT Director, Leif Dormsjo, and tasked him with rescuing the troubled H Street Benning Road streetcar line. Dormsjo in turn hired Tim Borchers, an Interfleet consultant with prior experience as launch manager of the still-beleaguered Atlanta Streetcar. With Borchers’ help, Dormsjo and Bowser were finally able to bring the streetcar into operation. Unfortunately, they did so by maintaining the previous administration’s management and operation contract with RATP Dev MacDonald Transit (RDMDT), the corporation whose mismanagement turned the DC Streetcar into a punch line.

The Train to Nowhere for No One

From the time it began more than a decade ago, the DC Streetcar project has been beset by numerous cost overruns and a litany of broken promises and blown deadlines.

The most obvious failure has been its poor construction and design. The result of the same cost-cutting logic behind most privatization attempts, a decision was made to build the Streetcar’s tracks in curbside mixed traffic rather than giving it a dedicated lane or operating it along a median. While it is true that this made the project cheaper than securing the necessary rights of way, it also eliminated one of the system’s potential advantages over other forms of surface transportation.

Because the DC Streetcar operates in curbside mixed traffic, it likely will not travel any faster than private cars or buses along the same route. Moreover, it lacks the flexibility to maneuver around obstructions. This decision eliminated one of the mode’s main sources of utility: its ability to quickly move people regardless of traffic. The result is a form of transit that costs more per mile than buses or cars, lacks their ability to change routes, and whose major advantage has been neutralized.

The blunders did not end with poor design, however. The contractors in charge of building the streetcar system failed miserably at the most basic of tasks. For example, they:

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38 District Department of Transportation. 22-Mile Priority Streetcar System: Request for Information. RFI# DCKA-2012-1-0083. Pg 7-8.
39 District Department of Transportation. 22-Mile Priority Streetcar System: Request for Information. RFI# DCKA-2012-1-0083. Pg 7-8.
40 District Department of Transportation. 22-Mile Priority Streetcar System: Request for Information. RFI# DCKA-2012-1-0083. Pg 7-8.
• failed to install switch heaters that would prevent snow and ice buildup on track components, necessitating costly retrofitting in order to get them back in working condition;\(^{47}\)

• built stops that were improperly lit and lacked ADA accessibility, necessitating further retrofitting;\(^{48}\)

• purchased cars from the Czech Republic before securing adequate storage facilities, exposing the vehicles to the elements and damaging them.\(^{59}\)

Once testing began, more problems arose including the streetcars’ tendency to catch fire,\(^{50}\) clip the sides of parked cars with their mirrors,\(^{51}\) scratch the edges of the platform due to improper alignment,\(^{52}\) and other design defects too numerous to mention.

The streetcar also suffers from a poorly planned route. The current H Street Benning Road route does not connect to the District’s major job centers, making the route of limited utility for commuters.\(^{53}\) It does not integrate well into the District’s existing transportation network, either, stopping just short of Union Station. Riders going to or from the Station have to navigate a large parking garage and an overpass to get to their destination.\(^{54}\) Without effective integration with the rest of the transportation network and little use for either commuters or tourists, the streetcar’s main purpose is limited to transporting people up and down H Street’s short retail corridor.

Moreover, the H Street corridor is already served by three Metrobus lines: the X1, X2 and X9.\(^{55}\) These are among the most popular bus routes with an average of over 17,400 riders every weekday.\(^{56}\) They connect commuters to job centers and serve District residents who live east of the Anacostia River in Wards 7 and 8. These routes already provide broader service than the streetcar does with the added flexibility of being able to maneuver around obstructions.

Given the limited utility of the project to residents and its greater costs compared to existing bus transit in the corridor, one of the few remaining justifications given for the project was its utility in encouraging economic redevelopment along the corridor. There is little direct evidence that the streetcar actually had much to do with reinvestment in H Street. In fact, other explanations are more likely.

In 2006, Mayor Adrian Fenty began the Great Streets Initiative (GSI), a grant program that provided up to $85,000 to small businesses renovating space on corridors designated for the program.\(^{57}\) H Street was the first GSI corridor and the only one eligible for small business grants until 2013.\(^{58}\)

The D.C. Council also authorized the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development to issue up to $95 million in tax increment finance notes to support retail within six small retail priority areas along the initial GSI corridors. Up to $25 million


\(^{48}\) Khawani, Vijay. Peer Review: APTA. Pg 10 – 11.


\(^{51}\) Khawani, Vijay. Peer Review. APTA. Pg 15; Di Caro, Martin. \textit{Meet D.C.’s New Streetcar Launch Manager.} July 20, 2015. WAMU.

\(^{52}\) Khawani, Vijay. Peer Review. APTA. Pg 8.

\(^{53}\) Yglesias, Matthew. \textit{Meet the worst transit project in America.} July 25, 2014. Vox.com


out of the $95 million was authorized for the H Street corridor. These grants would surely have factored into businesses decisions to set up shop on the H Street corridor rather than another neighborhood in the city, irrespective of the streetcar project.

A Beleaguered Project, an Abused Workforce

Before passenger service even began, the abusive management of the streetcar project’s private contractor RDMT led to an attempt by the workforce to unionize. Rather than respect the rights of streetcar workers, RDMT and its hiring subcontractor The Midtown Group instead pursued an anti-union strategy of intimidation, firing one third of its workforce prior to a scheduled union election. Valuable time had to be spent training replacements for the employees who had been unjustly fired. These actions also proved ineffective, as only a year later their workforce again fought to unionize, won an NLRB certified election, and overwhelmingly voted to join ATU Local 689, which represents WMATA workers.

In part, their decision to join reflected frustration with the unsafe working conditions they had been forced to endure. In particular, several streetcar workers testified that they were given conflicting instructions as to how to properly signal the cars’ operators during car storage (leading to one instance where, due to miscommunication, one of the streetcar’s windshields was cracked); were asked to drain track switches without proper equipment, and were expected to operate the streetcars with faulty radios, making it difficult to report incidents.

Currently earning around $20 an hour at top rate, streetcar operators drive their vehicles alongside the X2 bus, whose senior operators would make a living wage of $31.69 per hour for transporting people down the same street.

In their effort to keep labor costs artificially low, RDMT and Midtown Group created an abusive and unsafe work environment that sparked a union organizing drive. In their attempt to keep workers from unionizing, RDMT and Midtown Group forced out qualified workers and had to spend time and taxpayer money training replacements who ultimately joined a union anyway. Similarly, in their efforts to keep construction costs down, the design-build contractors failed at the most basic level, resulting in long delays and costly retrofits.


62 Kevin Baker Affidavit, taken March 10, 2015.

63 Germaine Wells Affidavit, taken March 11, 2015.

64 Damian Simms Affidavit, taken March 10, 2015.


66 AGREEMENT between WASHINGTON METROPOLITAN AREA TRANSIT AUTHORITY and LOCAL UNION 689 of the AMALGAMATED TRANSIT UNION AFL-CIO. January 5, 2015.
to make the system usable. Finally, the desire to deliver a public good at bargain prices led DDOT to launch a service that was poorly designed, poorly managed, wildly expensive, and publicly disdained before the first car ran down the track.

This chain of bad decisions left workers and the general public in the unenviable position of trying to salvage a useful service from the incompetence of private contractors and the public officials who failed to oversee them.

Is it working now, though? In spite of the unusually large amount of time and money invested in the system, ridership numbers on the DC Streetcar are strictly mediocre among U.S. streetcar systems.\(^{67}\) This is in spite of the higher overall density of the H Street Benning Road area compared to the other systems with similar ridership numbers. Given that these numbers were taken from a period in which streetcar service is still fare-free, it’s unlikely that they will significantly improve over time.

**CONCLUSION**

Public officials’ willingness to forfeit their responsibilities and entrust a for-profit contractor with a public service is not unique to the District of Columbia. The story is the same in dozens of American cities. A cash-strapped municipality sees opportunity in attracting vaguely-defined “Millennials.” It envisions cosmetic urban improvements to attract them: an unprotected bike lane here, a privately-built rail segment there, a WiFi-equipped bus that runs between new condos, downtown offices, and a nightlife spot. It is then propositioned by a private contractor. They promise that they can provide these services less expensively and more effectively than the city itself. It sounds too good to be true, because it is.

With its sub-state status and callous federal oversight, the District understandably seeks an opportunity to control its own services rather than negotiate with regional partners to fix and fund a system in decay. But most Americans understand this simple truth: you get what you pay for. If you buy an automobile for the price of a scooter, you shouldn’t expect it to perform like a sports car. When the District decided to bring in private contractors who promised to provide public services for a fraction of public sector costs, they adopted exactly this sort of logic.

The District of Columbia’s argument that privatization of public transit would save money and improve service has been shortsighted and disproven. Its continued pursuit of privatization has been at the expense of the safety and reliability of both the regional and local public transit systems, has unnecessarily undermined public confidence in these services, and has failed to deliver promised cost savings.

Unfortunately, despite several public and private confrontations with Circulator and Streetcar workers and their community allies, Mayor Bowser and many District leaders have refused to municipalize any of the services or take a direct interest in building a better regional system. Instead, they continue to pursue privatization of public services more broadly, including the introduction of privately-run ambulances,\(^ {68}\) the expansion of charter schools,\(^ {69}\) and the continued


\(^{69}\) Decarr, Kristin. *Bowser’s Mayoral Win in DC Signals Relief for Charter
contracting of the District’s school lunch system to a private contractor despite numerous well-documented failures.\textsuperscript{70}

Given the failure of local elected officials to acknowledge the limitations of privatization and their refusal to change course despite high-profile failures, it will be up to the people of the District to take the wheel. They can do this by organizing and demanding a public transit system that is once again the envy of the nation, as it was when Metrorail first opened. With riders and workers aligned, they have the power to demand bus service that serves all of the residents of the District, rather than one that only subsidizes the leisure of city elites. They can demand that transit projects serve community needs rather than functioning simply as toys for regional developers. More immediately, they can demand that District officials municipalize existing local transit services.

As this report makes clear, however, at the core of any such effort should be a fundamental principle: public services must first and foremost serve the public good, not the needs of private profit.

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