

# City Council/School Board Subcommittee Meeting

## Minutes

February 24, 2025

5:00 p.m.

Alexandria City Public Schools Central Office

1340 Braddock Place, Alexandria VA 22314

Mayor Gaskins called the meeting to order at 5 p.m. and introduced two presentations. The Mayor said that the program would begin with an overview of existing transportation, with a focus on current routes and utilization by students, and insights into existing capacity.

### **DASH Presentation**

Martin Barna, the Director of Planning at DASH, introduced the DASH CEO, Josh Baker, who attended virtually. The presentation highlighted the long-standing collaboration between DASH and ACPS.

Key points include:

- DASH has been operating for over 40 years, with 12 bus routes and the King Street Trolley. They average 17,000 weekday boardings and 5.3 million passengers in FY 2024.
- The fleet consists of 101 active buses, and the annual operating subsidy is \$34.4 million, with a subsidy cost of \$6.50 per rider.
- DASH employs over 230 people in its Operations Department with over 200 bus operators; DASH is fully-staffed in terms of bus operators, despite staffing shortages in previous years.
- Notable milestones in the DASH-ACPS partnership include the launch of the free student ride program in 2017, the introduction of free fares for all rides in 2020, and the use of larger buses for ACHS routes starting in 2022.
- Ridership data was shared, detailing average loads per trip and per route.

The presentation also mentioned a planned facility expansion project.

## **Discussion on DASH Presentation**

Chair Rief raised concerns about the \$34.4M annual subsidy and its potential impact on DASH's FY 2026 budget. City Manager Parajon explained that, while DASH received a base budget cut earlier, future budget increases should offset that reduction, and the expansion wouldn't likely affect the capital side. Mayor Gaskins inquired about how grants would be used in DASH's expansion, with Mr. Barna confirming that state and federal funds would help expand the fleet by 18 buses, while the facility expansion would be funded through Smartscale. City Manager Parajon also highlighted that ridership levels impact formula funds allocated to DASH and regional providers.

Chair Rief requested more detailed data on student ridership, including times of day, and asked about the frequency of Route 36A, which operates every 15 minutes. Mayor Gaskins inquired about the challenges DASH faces in providing before- and after-school services, with Mr. Barna identifying capacity as the main issue. When asked about DASH's high retention rates, Mr. Barna cited competitive pay, a positive working environment, paid training, and retirement benefits, while Josh Baker emphasized DASH's focus on workforce retention and its reputation as a premier employer.

Mayor Gaskins also asked about the cost of routes 30, 36, and 31, with Mr. Barna explaining that costs depend on pay hours, frequency, and ride duration. Mayor Gaskins requested mapping and layering for more insight into costs.

Regarding safety, Josh Baker assured the group that DASH has a strong safety record, emphasizing de-escalation training for drivers, with support from the Alexandria Police Department. Mayor Gaskins acknowledged the high volume of student riders and suggested engaging students with surveys to address potential issues.

Chair Rief sought more specifics on daily boardings, especially during peak times and special events, while Councilman Chapman asked for more detailed mappings, noting that the City's GIS department could assist. Mr. Barna cautioned that balancing the mapping request with current capacity could present challenges. Dr.

Alicia Hart mentioned her team's efforts to compile this data while considering privacy concerns for students.

## **ACPS Presentation**

Dr. Hart presented an ACPS study focusing on several key areas related to transportation planning. The presentation covered policies influencing transportation, current logistics, and the history of the DASH/ACPS partnership, highlighting how both entities have collaborated on ACHS transportation. The study also provided insights into basic high school transportation data for ACPS, including eligibility criteria for student ridership, which takes into account the distance to bus stops and safety.

On average, ACPS transports about 7,400 students daily across 95 routes. The presentation also addressed students requiring special services, such as those under the McKinney-Vento federal provision for students experiencing homelessness and Specialized Transportation (SPED) for 63 students, including 55 high schoolers. Route schedules are shared with families two weeks before school starts, and daily notifications regarding accidents or delays are sent to families and schools. The ParentPortal GPS tracker allows families to track their student's bus in real time, promoting transparency.

A slide on the Route Development Process was also introduced, explaining the use of Edulog as a tool in this process. The partnership between DASH and ACPS began in 2014, with family engagement being a major focus of their collaboration.

## **Discussion ACPS Presentation**

Mayor Gaskins inquired about legal requirements and policies related to bus stops and asked about the transportation operation budget, which Dr. Hart confirmed is set at \$14.4M in the FY 26 budget. Dr. Hart also highlighted that vacancy in leadership roles within the transportation department, coupled with a bus driver shortage, is the biggest challenge facing ACPS transportation.

When asked by Mayor Gaskins about communication within the transportation department, Dr. Hart emphasized the importance of engagement, describing it as both crucial and effective. Chair Rief questioned how DASH decides on route changes, to which Mr. Barna explained that agency oversight and service plans guide these decisions, with input from various departments. Chair Rief also wanted

to know how this process connects to the budget, and Mr. Parajon stated that flexibility and necessary modifications align with the budget process.

Chair Rief raised concerns about the 1.5-mile walk radius for students and sought further details about the greatest walking distance. Vice Chair Booz inquired about the GPS tracking system for buses, with Dr. Hart confirming its frequent use, though its utilization tends to decline over time. Mayor Gaskins expressed interest in learning more about facilities, planning, and bus maintenance at the next meeting, as well as the walkshed for students and public feedback on DASH services, possibly through 311.

Councilman Chapman asked if privacy concerns regarding student data had been addressed, and Dr. Hart assured that ACPS staff would handle these issues. Vice Chair Booz stressed the importance of prioritizing student safety in future discussions, particularly regarding the privacy of bus mapping systems, and emphasized that student bus routes should not be publicly accessible. Lastly, Chair Rief requested more information on the Smartscale grant and potential funding formulas to be discussed at the March meeting. Mayor Gaskins emphasized that safety and cost data should be also prioritized for discussion at the March meeting.

### **Approval of Meeting Minutes and Other Discussions**

Mayor Gaskins made a motion to approve the minutes from the February 3rd meeting, which was seconded by Vice Chair Booz and Councilman Chapman, and the minutes were approved.

Dr. Kay-Wyatt asked if there were any unresolved items from previous meetings, and SIO Dana Wedeles noted that most remaining items included updates on Minnie Howard, Virginia Tech, and early childhood education.

Councilman Chapman inquired about the structure of upcoming meetings and how to streamline information sharing. Chair Rief suggested that members send requests in advance to help with preparation. Mayor Gaskins proposed dedicating 30 minutes to major topics and another 30 minutes for other issues. CM Parajon agreed, suggesting that quick updates could be handled in 5-10 minutes, balancing the proposed structure.

Dr. Kay-Wyatt noted that more time would likely be needed for questions and answers on larger topics. Councilman Chapman requested an update on collective bargaining at the next meeting, particularly regarding its relationship to the budget season. Mayor Gaskins announced that meeting start times will be at 5 p.m. until June, with potential changes by Fall 2025.

The meeting adjourned at 6:12 p.m.

END