

## Why GAO Did This Study

The Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority's (WMATA) public rail transit and bus systems are vital to the national capital region. However, the 35-year-old rail system has experienced safety and reliability problems, including fatal accidents. A 16-member board of directors governs WMATA, setting policies and providing oversight. Recent reports have noted weaknesses in WMATA's governance structure and recommended changing it. GAO assessed WMATA's governance in terms of the board's roles and responsibilities, oversight, and strategic planning. To do so, GAO compiled leading practices from previous GAO work on public and private sector governance, non-GAO transit governance studies, and strategic planning standards; then compared WMATA's approach to those practices. GAO also spoke with six transit agencies selected based on board composition and ridership, among other things.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends among other things that the WMATA board of directors follow through with its efforts to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the board; conduct a regular self-assessment of the board's effectiveness; and improve its strategic planning process by actions such as increasing the board's involvement in the process and updating the agency's performance metrics. WMATA reviewed a draft of this report and noted that it has taken recent actions that begin to address some issues covered in this report.

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## PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

### Washington Metro Could Benefit from Clarified Board Roles and Responsibilities, Improved Strategic Planning

#### What GAO Found

Although some requirements and guidance for board roles and responsibilities are provided in the WMATA compact and board procedures, WMATA board members, officials, and other stakeholders have reported that sometimes the board focuses on management's day-to-day responsibilities rather than higher level board responsibilities such as oversight and strategic planning. This focus may have resulted from, for example, inadequate delineation and documentation of the board's responsibilities as well as inadequate communication among board members. In addition, while leading governance practices state that effective transit boards monitor the effectiveness of the board's organization, structure, and functioning through a regular board self-assessment, WMATA's board does not do so. As a result, the board lacks a key mechanism for regular, ongoing measurement of its performance. In April 2011, the board released draft bylaws that clarify the roles and responsibilities for the board and propose that the board chair coordinate a board self-evaluation. These draft bylaws represent a good first step toward addressing some of the concerns discussed in this report but will need to be adopted and then effectively implemented to achieve their desired effect.

The board's oversight role is supported by the board's committee structure, which provides a communication channel for information to reach the board. Past board practices such as infrequent meetings of the Audit and Investigations Subcommittee and the lack of routine briefings on outside safety recommendations may have impaired the ability of the board to use information about areas in need of improvement regarding the operations and finances of the agency. However, given the variety in other transit agencies' practices and the lack of clear criteria on how often audit committees should meet, there is no clear standard against which to measure WMATA's practices. The board's draft bylaws propose changes to the organization of the board's committee structure.

WMATA has developed elements of strategic planning over the past 4 years, but the agency's board and management could enhance their strategic focus and long-term planning processes to improve performance. WMATA acknowledged several failed past efforts at strategic planning. WMATA officials said that prior attempts failed due to a lack of management support, employee buy-in, and specific actions to execute the plans; and a focus on tactical versus strategic decision making. WMATA management has developed several elements of strategic planning, such as a mission statement, goals, objectives, and strategies. However, the agency's strategic planning process could benefit from more board and stakeholder involvement, internal and external environmental assessments, longer time frames, program evaluations, and updated performance metrics. In June 2011, the board launched an effort to overhaul its strategic planning process.