



King County

Department of Transportation

Metro Transit Division

Marketing & Service Information

201 S. Jackson Street

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Seattle, WA 98104-3856

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TO: National Federation of the Blind, Seattle Chapter

RE: **Accessibility of the Metro Transit website**

Thank you for this opportunity to provide information to you on the work I am doing to improve the accessibility of the Metro website.

First, I would like to introduce myself. My name is Mark Bilodeau and I was hired as Metro's Webmaster in October 2010. I started my career back in 1981 as a graphic designer for print collateral (ads, brochures, posters, packaging and logos). I made the switch to web design in 1994. I have seen a great deal of changes in web development since the first site I created back then. I have learned a lot over the years about accessibility. My goal for every website is to provide a browsing experience that is beneficial to all users.

Second, I want to acknowledge that the site that I have inherited is not as accessible as it could be. It's certainly showing its age and needs a complete overhaul. And that's exactly what I have been working on for the past year. There's a new Metro site coming in the near future. Many accessibility issues will be addressed in new site; however there have been a few challenges along the way. The challenges include:

- **The Metro site uses a table-based template.** As many of you know, tables create a lot of unnecessary noise when browsing a site with a screen reader. On the Metro site, the top header, left navigation bar, main content area and footer are all locked into place using a table. This is not how I build sites anymore. My goal is to change to a "table less" layout as soon as we can so people using alternate browsing methods will have an easier time navigating the Metro site. Unfortunately the page template is not under my control. Updating the template is in the hands the King County Web Team. And I know that this issue is high on their radar screens too. The new site will be launched with a table-based layout with the hope that the page template will be updated to a table less layout at point in the future. While I wait for the template to be updated, I am working on making the content area of the page as accessible as possible. I won't be using tables for layout purposes. I will only use tables where it's appropriate for data.

- **Customers are commenting that their screen readers cannot read our bus schedules pages.** I have received many customer comments regarding the “unreadable” bus schedules. Earlier this year, I initiated the research and development of a new way of displaying the bus schedule information so screen readers can read the data in the timetable. We have been investigating and testing various methods. It will take a considerable amount of time to figure out the right solution and deal with all the technical issues that arise. There’s a group of us dedicated to getting this done as quickly as possible.
- **We have limited resources and thousands of pages to edit.** Because of budget constraints, Metro cannot support a large staff to maintain and develop the website. All the development and daily maintenance that occurs on the site is done primarily by me. There is a small staff in another department that is in charge of the bus schedules, reroutes, and transit alerts. Our small group works together to keep the site up-to-date and continue our efforts to improve the site.

Third, I would like to give you a brief overview of what has changed in the site to make things more accessible.

- In October 2010, I created a new Snow, Ice and Flood map that allows screen readers to read out the Service Area links on the map. The Service Area links are filters for the data table that appears on the page. Prior to this update, the map was a graphic with image map areas outlining the service areas. I don’t use image maps very much anymore. There are better ways of building things now. The technique I used for the Snow, Ice and Flood map is more efficient and accessible.
- I am hiding a lot of the graphics from screen readers. In other words, if a graphic is used on a page and it’s purely decorative, I separate it from the content. The blind or low-vision user doesn’t require decorative graphics to understand the content, so why have a screen reader describe a non-essential graphic? I have done this on some of the newer pages I have added to the site. However, there’s still more work to be done on older pages. The new site will keep decorative graphics behind the scenes.
- Data tables are being constructed properly where I define the table head and table body. I also avoid nesting tables inside tables.
- Recently, I introduced an accessible slide show on the Metro home page. Prior to this update, there was a JavaScript-controlled slide show using only graphics. The graphics didn’t offer any text or content for a screen reader to read to it was a non-functional element on the page for people using assistive technologies. The old slide show also required JavaScript in order to function. When JavaScript was disabled, the slide show disappeared. The slide show is important to our home page because we use it to communicate Transit Alerts. The new slide show is better suited for screen readers and works with or without JavaScript. The slides have HTML text and the images have alt tags.

In closing, I want to say that this is just the start of the work that will be done to make the Metro site accessible and Section 508 compliant. Thank you again for allowing me to provide you this information. If you have any questions, comments or suggestions, please direct them to me. I would also like to hear from anyone interested in becoming a beta tester for our site. This would really help us as we create the new site and need the site tested on a screen reader. If anyone would like to volunteer to test our pages using assistive technologies, please contact me by email or phone.

Sincerely,

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King County Metro

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