

# The Washington Post

## STUNG AT THE PUMPS, MORE HOP ON A BUS

BY LENA H. SUN AND JONATHAN MUMMALO  
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Transit systems that ferry commuters into Washington from outlying regions are experiencing significant ridership increases as some gas prices pass \$4 a gallon, and Metro officials caution that trains could be overwhelmed if prices go even higher.

Officials are looking for ways to buy or lease more buses, expand parking, encourage employers to stagger work schedules and persuade current riders to avoid the peak of the morning rush period.

In Loudoun County, ridership on county-run commuter buses jumped 23 percent in April from April 2007. Officials scrambled to put additional buses into service, two months ahead of schedule.

In Maryland, ridership on the 15 commuter bus routes into Washington increased 15 percent in April, double the rate of increase from last fall, state transportation officials said. On Wednesday, state officials approved \$3.3 million to expand bus service on nine of those routes.

Metro, which at 1.2 million subway and bus trips on an average weekday is the area's largest transit provider, is working on a contingency plan to help itself -- and the region -- prepare for a huge shift to public transit should gas prices hit \$5 a gallon. Despite fare and fee increases in January, Metro's average weekday ridership in April -- 771,811 -- was slightly more than 4 percent above that in April 2007.

"There is a point at which we may see a massive move of commuters from driving to transit because of cost," General Manager John B. Catoe Jr. told board members last week.

Metro is urging regional officials to discuss options, even though they might not involve Metrorail. Local transportation departments could run bus-only lanes. Large employers, including the federal government, with a workforce of 300,000 in the Baltimore-Washington area, could institute mandatory flextime. Subway riders could shift their commute so they are not riding at the height of the morning rush, when trains arrive at downtown stations between 7:30 and 8:30 a.m.

"We're not always going to have the solutions," said Nat Bottigheimer, Metro's chief planner. "We're trying to give examples of the kinds of things that can be done so people will be comfortable taking a leap of faith to change a habit."

Transit officials say rising gas prices will most affect solo drivers with the longest commutes, many of whom are considering carpools and vanpools.

On the regional Commuter Connections bulletin board on the Web, ride-sharing postings from Fairfax County and Loudoun increased 87.5 percent in the first quarter of the year from the same period last year.

Sandy Silzer of Sterling, who drives an 11-person vanpool to Northwest Washington, has a waiting list of half a dozen. She is considering upgrading from a 12-person van to one that seats 15. The high gas prices are also having an effect on what she charges: She might soon have to raise her fee of \$180 a month if prices keep going up, she said.

"Lately, I've been filling it when I get to half a tank, because I've been trying to edge the prices. They've been going up so frequently," said Silzer, who has a government job in the District.

Bill Powers of Burke, a program manager with the Department of Homeland Security, started looking for transportation alternatives when he began spending \$200 a week to gas up his Jeep Commander back in March, up from about \$125 in November. He always enjoyed the flexibility of having his own ride, enough even to forgo the transit subsidy his employer offered.

He began calling vanpools and soon realized that he wasn't alone: He called six before finding an opening.

"I finally struck gold about two or three weeks ago," said Powers, who now hops into a van with 14 others about a mile from home at 6:05 a.m. He's at his office building in Northwest Washington by 6:45 a.m.

For people who are not regular transit users, the first hurdle is the biggest. But across the country, enough people are taking that step to increase transit ridership nationwide, said Rob Padgette, director of policy, development and research at the American Public Transportation Association, an industry group. "We haven't seen anything like this in a long time," he said.

Gas prices probably have much to do with that increase, but there is little research that shows a direct correlation.

During the 1970s oil crisis, gasoline shortages pushed national transit ridership up -- 6.7 percent in 1979 over the previous year and 5.4 percent in 1980. By comparison, ridership grew 2.1 percent in 2007, but that was the highest level in 50 years.

Padgett predicts that the number will rise, particularly for rail, because those trips are the longest.

"We're going to see some pretty striking numbers this year, and they will show up later this year if fuel prices remain high," he said.

On Friday, the Transportation Department reported that in March, Americans drove 11 billion fewer miles than in March 2007, a 4.3 percent drop and the first time in nearly three decades that traffic has dropped between one March and the next.

For some local officials, the link between skyrocketing gas prices and the jump in public transportation rides is clear.

Loudoun officials are scrambling to put more commuter buses on the road for the two-hour trips between remote parts of the county and downtown Washington. Average daily ridership in April was 3,281, but already this month, some days have exceeded 4,000 riders, county transit chief Nancy Gourley said.

She said the agency might need to lease more buses, consider running feeder buses to take commuters to transit centers and expand parking at a 750-space lot.

Ridership on Virginia Railway Express, which runs trains from Manassas and Fredericksburg to Union Station, is also increasing, jumping nearly 12 percent in April, according to spokesman Mark Roeber.

In anticipation of high demand this fall, VRE is adding five rail cars each month until October, when it will have 106 cars, up from 78, he said. That will mean 4,000 more seats. April's average weekday ridership was 15,312.

MARC ridership increased 6 percent in March over the previous year and trains are at capacity, according to a spokeswoman for the Maryland Transit Administration, which operates the Penn, Camden and Brunswick lines. Average weekday ridership in March was 31,943.

Some drivers made the switch to public transit months ago, when gas seemed expensive at \$3 a gallon.

Paul Fickinger, who commutes between Severna Park and Chevy Chase, took a combination of the MARC train and Metrorail two or three days a week last summer instead of driving. Now it's more like four days, sometimes five.

"The tipping point was probably when [gas prices] hit \$3," said Fickinger, head of property management at a real estate company.

Aletha Randolph also drove when she began her job in Crystal City three years ago. But the cost of commuting across the Potomac River from Cheverly grew too high. She started riding Metro in January.

"It takes a little bit more time, but as far as saving money . . . now, instead of filling up my car every week, week and a half, I now fill it up close to every three weeks," she said.

This month, weekday Metro ridership during peak periods was 509,533 trips.

If riders spread out their rush-hour trips, instead of crowding into the "peak of the peak," Metro could accommodate an additional 140,000 trips on the subway, Metro's Bottigheimer said.

One of the biggest obstacles to spreading out ridership is space at parking lots, which fill up quickly at suburban stations near the ends of the lines. One option, Bottigheimer said, would be to set aside spaces for carpoolers.

Philip Westcott of New Market, a transportation engineer, is an expert on how to get from point A to point B. But he still hasn't found a good rail or bus option for his commute to Baltimore. So he has had to suck it up at the pump, paying \$60 to fill the tank of his Nissan Xterra. That lasts for four days of commuting.

If it gets much worse, he said, he and his wife will have to join carpools. "If gas prices get above \$4.50 or something, that's the only option we have, really," he said.



## **METRO CONSIDERING SPACING OUT BUS STOPS**

BY SOMMER MATHIS  
MAY 27, 2008

We'd be remiss if we didn't point out a story from this morning's Examiner which quotes Metro Assistant General Manager Gerald Francis saying the agency is considering spacing out bus stops on many Metrobus lines in order to improve bus service. Perhaps Francis and company have been reading DCist comment threads? The too-frequent spacing of bus stops, which occur at nearly every block on some lines, has been a rallying cry for District residents for years.

Of course, WMATA is still just considering such action, and as we know, that means a plan must first be drafted and then debated for months and months and months before you could end up seeing stops on your route moved. Still, since we already know where most of you stand on this issue, we know you'll want to suggest which lines ought to be at the top of the list in the comments. After all, we're starting to suspect Metro officials might actually be reading them.



## **TO SPEED SERVICE ON METROBUS, AGENCY EYES SPACING OUT STOPS**

BY TARYN LUNTZ  
MAY 27, 2008

Metrobus customers may soon have to walk an extra block to catch a ride.

Metro officials are considering spacing out bus stops — which are placed on almost every block along many routes — as part of a broader plan to improve the speed and reliability of the bus network.

“That’s one thing we’re looking at — spacing out the bus stops,” Metro Assistant General Manager Gerald Francis said. “Right now, the buses stop all the time — that backs up traffic, and we don’t gain anything.”

Francis said many people wouldn’t mind walking an extra block to catch the bus if they knew their ride would be quicker because of it.

Metro’s erratic bus service is by far the most common customer complaint in the system.

Metro officials last week unveiled a proposal that would create 18 new limited-stop or express bus corridors throughout the system during the next six years, bringing the total to 24.

Bus service would be between 20 and 30 percent faster along those corridors, agency planners estimated.

Metro is also planning to bring back the popular NextBus system within the next year, General Manager John Catoe told the agency’s board of directors last week.

Metro started NextBus, which uses GPS tracking and advanced computer technology to analyze traffic patterns and predict when a bus would be arriving at a stop, in November 2006, but discontinued it in October 2007 because it was inaccurate 20 percent of the time, officials said.

Francis told The Examiner earlier this month that the agency is also considering giving dispatcher authority to bus supervisors.

“We’re going to make a gallant effort to get out there and see what we can do about schedules,” Francis said.

Bus supervisors currently respond to accidents and make sure the correct number of buses are on the streets, but are not responsible for altering buses’ schedules when traffic causes them to bunch up and arrive at stops two or three at a time.

With dispatcher authority, bus supervisors could send some buses forward or reverse some when buses pile up.