

***Seamless or Stressful: Which Future Will We Choose for Our Region's Transit Network?***

By Joe McAndrew, Sarah Kline, and Ralph Buehler; originally in ***Greater Greater Washington*** - May 29, 2019

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In this article, the authors report on how transit operations across the Washington metro area are fragmented and don't adequately match the region's transportation demands. This is reflected in the nearly 15 different transit bus agencies in the region that serve the District of Columbia, Virginia, and Maryland; two commuter rail operators, a regional subway system, streetcar service, commuter buses, paratransit service, and a soon-to-be-delivered independent light rail service--the Purple Line in suburban Maryland.

The "Capital Region", which extends from Baltimore to Richmond, has a diverse mix of transit assets that provide nearly 1.8 million trips on an average weekday. The most extensive and greatest variety of transit services in the region is in the Washington Metropolitan area. However, the fragmented and uncoordinated transit services make the system less convenient, less dependable, and less competitive.

Navigating the various systems can be challenging, sometimes discouraging, with various bus-to-rail-to-bus transfers that must be taken in order to travel from Maryland to Virginia. There is no simplified system that allows a one-seat ride or even a two-seat ride in many instances when crossing state lines. Combined with varying fare systems, apps, websites, and schedules to navigate, this can be a daunting task even for the most transit savvy rider.

Trip planning is often difficult because a current, or would-be, customer must know something about that transit system in order to get the most basic information. Currently there is not a "one-stop-shop" available for people to plan, pay, or receive other pertinent information regarding how to travel between systems.

Coordination between systems often is lacking in terms of regional planning, coordination of routes, schedules and fare systems, and a more committed multi-jurisdictional coordination effort would lead to a more competitive network, offering a better customer experience, limit roadway congestion, enhance access to opportunity for all wage earners, and serve as a mechanism to attract more talent to the region. With nearly 50 percent of commuter is in the region living in one (1) County and working in another and nearly 20 percent crossing state borders to get to their jobs, this coordination is necessary to remain a viable alternative to driving solo.

There is a bright side, though. Transit providers are working on simplifying certain aspects to offer a more seamless fare payment system with the integration of mobile fare payments being developed. However, this is offset by its limitations as the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA), continues to develop upgraded fare payment systems and integrating with the rest of the region has been rather slow while continual testing takes place.

## **So what? What is OMNIRIDE Doing to Provide a More Seamless System and Coordinate with Other Transit Agencies?**

OMNIRIDE has been involved in numerous efforts recently to expand its reach in the region while coordinating efforts with other systems. This includes new commuter routes that operate into Stafford County, increased frequency of service and better connectivity at Metro Stations and other transit hubs.

Over the summer, one of the largest regional coordination efforts in some time took place with the summer shutdown of WMATA's Blue and Yellow Lines on the Metrorail system. This herculean effort required the coordination of numerous transit systems who offered supplemental services, provided additional equipment to operate shuttles, and operated different types of services to minimize the traffic impact.

OMNIRIDE provided robust marketing of its Commuter Express and Ride Share systems, as well as provided two free shuttles to connect with the Rippon and Woodbridge VRE stations. One route operated from the Dale City Commuter Lot to Rippon and another route operated from the Lake Ridge Commuter Lot to Woodbridge. These routes supplemented existing commuter services and provided another alternative for passengers that did not want to drive to a rail station or to their employment elsewhere in the region.

OMNIRIDE staff have also created a working group with Fairfax County. This group meets quarterly to discuss planning initiatives in both counties. Both OMNIRIDE and Fairfax staff have shared restructuring plans and learning from each other, the challenges and successes of such large changes. With phase 2 of the Silver Line opening in the next year or so, both agencies are looking at how more regional coordination and collaboration could lead to better connectivity to western Prince William, western Fairfax and even Loudoun County. Fairfax County staff has invited OMNIRIDE staff to a number of sessions to study the feasibility of joint Commuter Choice grant applications for the future as well as opportunities for better connectivity to serve locations such as Fort Belvoir and the Dulles Corridor.

OMNIRIDE staff have also been active working with the District Department of Transportation as they develop a network of bus only lanes in downtown DC. Over the summer, new lanes were created along busy H and I Streets, NW to assist with traffic congestion brought on by the WMATA summer shutdown. OMNIRIDE staff attended various meetings with DDOT and WMATA staff to study the feasibility for more lanes in the future. Fortunately, the dedicated lanes along H and I Streets have become permanent and the potential to expand to other major corridors is a very real possibility.

Loudoun County staff and OMNIRIDE staff are also coordinating efforts and sharing information. As both agencies operate very similar types of commuter operations, information sharing has led to both agencies studying different ways to operate in downtown DC. Coincidentally, both agencies came to the same conclusion regarding limiting crosstown travel and breaking the city up into smaller sections to allow more direct and reliable services to a smaller section of the city vs. long, meandering routes that travel from one end to the other. This will be evident on December 9<sup>th</sup> when OMNIRIDE launches its restructured commuter services from Gainesville by splitting up the destinations by commuter lot rather than trying to serve everything with one route. This model will be followed when the new Neabsco District garage opens in the next few years and staff is studying better ways to operate commuter service through the Telegraph Road and Horner Road Commuter Lots.

So, what does all of this mean? OMNIRIDE is actively working with regional transit partners to better coordinate and collaborate to improve the regional transit network, and the regions demands can be more efficiently met.