

# **The Washington Commute Could Return by Fall for Many Workers - It Won't be the Same as Before**

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Based on an article by Luz Lazo, The Washington Post

Most Washington-area residents who have spent the past year teleworking because of the pandemic could be back to their commutes by fall, but it might not resemble the commute they left behind in early 2020. Labor Day has become a target date among many employers eyeing the return of workers to the office, according to surveys, business leaders, and public officials.

Prospects for a return were improved this month when President Biden's administration announced that vaccines would be available to all adults by the end of May, although business groups and other experts say the transition to widespread in-person office work should be gradual and teleworking is likely to remain an option for many workers.

Chief concerns are the availability of child care and the full reopening of schools; reopening plans have already been announced by some school districts. Another positive element towards getting people back to the offices is that almost 1 in 5 adults in the greater Washington area have received at least one dose of the vaccine.

Officials at the region's transit agencies, which have operated at lower service levels for months, say they are ready to ramp up operations, although questions remain about whether agencies can lure back riders. Recent polls and research suggest commuters might be skeptical of using trains, buses, and carpools, and they could turn to personal vehicles to get to work. Any increase in driving during the recovery period could be offset by the continuation of high levels of teleworking. Transportation planners say they expect to see a transition period in which commuters try new ways to get to work, including more biking and walking for those closer to their offices. Some employers are discussing how to allow for variable work schedules so employees can commute outside the traditional rush hour periods.

There is no indication that an office return around Labor Day will resemble the "terrible traffic Tuesday" of the past, the day after the holiday when summer vacations ended and schools were open again causing Washington-area commuters to face a frustrating commute. The number of people expected to telework during the transition period and post-pandemic is expected to be higher than prior to the pandemic when approximately 10 percent of Washington-area workers were teleworking on any given day.

Some transportation experts are projecting at least 20 percent of the region could work remotely at any given time after the pandemic subsides. More than 91 percent of residents recently surveyed indicated they would support continuation of teleworking at least one day per week. Of the Washington region's 3.2 million jobs, 60 percent are telework-capable.

The likely changes in travel patterns and work habits provide an opportunity for transit to reinvent itself. Local agencies are working with businesses and tourist groups to ensure the region is prepared for a surge in commuters and visitors this summer. Agencies such as Metro are planning marketing campaigns and exploring incentives for commuters to return to Metro. Traffic congestion in the region, particularly during the morning rush hour, has plummeted almost 60 percent for those traveling into downtown Washington, DC.

Some commuters have said they are eager to return to their commutes, although their confidence relies heavily on the vaccine distribution progress.

## **So What? How will OmniRide React to Commuters Returning to Offices?**

With ridership holding steady at about 20 percent of pre-pandemic levels during the winter, new trends have started to emerge. Most notably, certain Pentagon-based commuter trips in both the morning and evening rush hours are reaching COVID capacity levels (i.e., maximum of 24 passengers). In this situation, the OmniRide operations team has addressed this in a variety of ways, from having strategic buses at various commuter lots to provide overcrowding relief to diverting trips into the Pentagon in the evening that are departing from downtown Washington, DC to provide additional capacity.

As better weather descends upon the region and commuters begin to try various commuting options, OmniRide is in a good position to be able to assist and react accordingly. As adjustments may be necessary due to significant overall ridership decreases, resources can be reallocated to target specific areas of concern without having too much service in one area and not enough in another. While we still have a ways to go to really know what the long term trends will be, continuing enhanced marketing, including that buses are clean and safe, following Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommendations for capacity, and ultimately word of mouth, will help generate ridership going forward. If the CDC determines that it is safe for more passengers to ride per vehicle, that will certainly have a positive impact of how OmniRide can more efficiently deploy resources and then address true overcrowding or add frequency where warranted.

OmniRide continues its robust cleaning regimen to ensure that riders have the safest and most pleasant experience. All operators and passengers must wear a face mask, air filters are cleaned routinely, hand sanitizers have been installed on all buses, and staff is testing various ionizers to further clean the air on the buses. As vaccines continue to be distributed and more people feel comfortable going out in public, riding transit and returning to the offices, OmniRide is in good position to be able to welcome passengers back to the system.

With slugging (informal carpooling) numbers still relatively low, commuter transportation has proven valuable for those trying to get to their offices/work sites. Both options still work in conjunction with each other, but until commuters are comfortable riding in a smaller vehicle with others, buses, vanpools, and trains will be the preferred mode of transportation. As more people do return to the office, the road network can only support so many single occupancy vehicles. Even a small increase in single occupancy vehicle commuting will result in traffic issues in the main lanes of the interstate, proving that high capacity transit options will be relevant during the return to work transition. As OmniRide staff determines where trends show higher levels of passengers vs. other areas of the commuter service, targeted marketing will be necessary to steer passengers to where the highest frequency and most space is available on buses and in commuter lots. This will be imperative as commuters try to develop new routines. With the new western maintenance facility coming on line in June 2021, with additional space for storing buses, the ability to quickly rectify service issues in both parts of the County is more readily available.

If commute times significantly change and begin showing trends outside of the normal commute, OmniRide will look at options such as later morning or earlier afternoon trips to try to follow new patterns. OmniRide's Metro Express service, which operates all day in eastern Prince William

County, as well as providing later morning/earlier afternoon options in western Prince William County, provide viable alternatives for passengers wishing to transfer to the Metrorail system to travel into Arlington, Alexandria, and downtown Washington, DC.