

Washington Area Employers Expect Majority of Workers Back in Offices by Fall

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Employers in the Washington, Baltimore, and Richmond metro areas expect nearly three-quarters of their staff to be back in the work place by fall, according to the latest survey from the Greater Washington Partnership. In Washington, only 29 percent of their workforce is expected to return physically to the workplace this winter, but the majority will return in person by the fall.

The Greater Washington Partnership, in a collaborative effort with several partner organizations, including public transit agencies and local chambers of commerce, surveyed 172 employers from the Washington, Baltimore, and Richmond areas about their reopening and resiliency plans. The respondents represent 139,000 employees who work across a number of different industries, including construction, universities, and health centers.

Most of the employees represented are currently teleworking, the majority of employers in the Washington area will pursue a phased approach to reopening that lets their workers return safely over the next six (6) to nine (9) months. Larger employers, however, generally expressed more caution about bringing workers back than smaller employers. Notably, when the partnership first surveyed employers in August, most of the respondents said they expected that at least half of their workforce to return to their respective workplaces by the winter. However, these plans have been delayed due to the number of COVID-19 cases and in-person schooling largely canceled.

In the second survey, conducted from mid-November through mid-December, employers in the Washington area are now planning for 76 percent of their employees to be back in person by the fall. 56 percent of those surveyed said they would still allow most of their employees to telework one or two days a week, but are concerned about employee mental health, lack of opportunities for collaboration, and organizational culture loss. The majority of employers said these factors were more concerning than productivity, revenue, and loss of customers. Most employers stated that when their employees return in-person, they would implement rapid COVID-19 testing and improve ventilation of systems to create safer worksites as part of their resiliency plans. Over half believe that rapid testing that delivers immediate results at the point of care is the top solution to keep worksites safe.

The survey also found that although employers are concerned about transit agencies' ability to ensure passengers wear masks, sanitize vehicles, and limit crowding, the level of confidence in transit agencies' ability to provide safe transportation has grown since August.

So what? How will OmniRide handle workers returning to their offices?

In March 2020, commuter bus ridership plummeted almost 95 percent when most employers began full-time teleworking. OmniRide was mainly transporting those essential workers that did not have jobs that allowed them the ability to work from home due to either being a front line worker, or in an industry that required in-person attendance. Commuter service was adjusted within a short amount of time to reduce services to correspond with the changes in demand. Local bus service remained at its pre-pandemic level to ensure that passengers could access essential businesses in the County and the Cities of Manassas and Manassas Park.

OmniRide took steps immediately to ensure the safety and well-being of not only the passengers, but operators, mechanics, supervisors, dispatchers, and other front-line staff that were needed to allow our service to continue to function. Increased sanitization was implemented immediately, face masks were required by all staff and customers, signage was placed at many bus stops and commuter lots to promote and provide social distancing, seating capacity was reduced, and operator barriers have been piloted on several buses. We are grateful for our critical front-line staff and their dedication and drive to ensure those that have to travel to work, medical appointments, or for essential shopping could rely on our services.

As ridership continued to be low through May, staff made plans to increase commuter service levels to the Friday-level of service as of mid-June based on trends that suggested more workers were going to return to their offices over the summer and into fall. On June 22, when service levels were significantly increased, an immediate spike in ridership occurred that continued for several weeks raising optimism that ridership was indeed heading in the right direction. The goal was to have this service in place over the summer to allow for proper social distancing on the vehicles and to be ready for schools to reopen for in-person classes. Once COVID-19 cases began to increase again, the spikes in ridership leveled off and stayed fairly consistent through the fall. On November 30, OmniRide temporarily suspended two routes that serve Mark Center and the Tysons-Woodbridge commuter services due to very low ridership and viable alternatives for passengers to still reach those destinations. No further changes were made to schedules other than normal schedule maintenance to adjust to certain patterns that staff were noticing. Local bus service still continues to run as it has been with ridership consistently at about 50 percent of normal ridership patterns.

However, even with the optimistic view of these recent surveys, we must be diligent in managing an effective and efficient service, and are looking at an array of streamlining services until ridership actually does rebound to a point where it makes economic sense to operate more trips. The first priorities are to continue to ensure enough service is operated to allow for reduced capacity on buses and providing critical local services for those passengers that must access jobs, medical appointments and other essential functions. As overcrowding is noticed, trips can easily be inserted to allow for more seating capacity until we receive guidance that more passengers are permitted to safely ride per vehicle. Secondly, staff will be closely monitoring what trends develop and which service areas most need the additional frequencies

of service, or even if a shift in the span of service needs to adjust based on commuting patterns. With Pentagon consistently being a major driver of ridership, they will most likely be the bellwether that is used to adapt to passenger trends in other parts of the system. Even when Pentagon reduced in-office attendance to only 40 percent of typical capacity, ridership on those routes were still much better than ridership to other areas of downtown DC or Northern Virginia.

OmniRide will continue outfitting buses with operator barriers, continue enhanced cleaning of vehicles and workspaces, work collaboratively with regional transit providers to align services to commuting pattern shifts, and most importantly, be there for our passengers when they are ready to return to their offices.