New Gainesville route offers commuters another option

A new state-funded commuter bus route linking Gainesville directly with the Pentagon started operating on December 12, encouraging more western Prince William County residents to share their commutes as plans proceed to build Express Lanes on I-66.

All funding for the new route is provided by the Northern Virginia Transportation Commission (NVTC) as part of its efforts to move more people and reduce traffic congestion on I-66 Inside the Beltway. The new route complements PRTC’s Gainesville-Washington route which launched in 2013.

“Currently some residents of Gainesville and Haymarket drive to Manassas in order to catch an OmniRide bus to the Pentagon, so we’re confident that many of those riders will shift to the new Gainesville-Pentagon route and save themselves some travel time while also reducing congestion on our roadways,” said PRTC Chairman Frank Principi.

In the first week of service, the new

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Kids enjoy Touch-A-Bus event

PRTC is always looking for ways to introduce our services to new riders of all ages. This fall one of the events we attended was held at the Freedom Center in Manassas, where children enjoyed boarding an OmniLink bus and pretending to be bus operators.
Behind the scenes, PRTC staff members are dedicated to improving the lives of area citizens by providing and promoting safe and reliable mobility services. Here’s a quick look at our Dispatch Department.

Each weekday at 3:00 a.m., PRTC’s Dispatch Department starts coming to life.

The dispatchers begin their day by confirming that buses and operators are available and filling any gaps as necessary. Their next task is to make sure the buses leave the Transit Center on time so trips can begin as scheduled.

Working in three different shifts, up to four dispatchers will be on hand for the next 21 hours.

Our dispatchers have constant contact with all bus operators through PRTC’s Computer-Aided Dispatch/Automatic Vehicle Locator (CAD/AVL) system, making sure they are aware of circumstances and incidents that could impact their routes such as road closures, accidents, and heavy pedestrian traffic for special events. When circumstances have a negative impact on service, dispatchers move buses around the region like pieces on a chess board, minimizing the impact on our passengers.

During rush hours, dispatchers monitor approximately 100 operators at a time, but the communication goes both ways! The operators keep the Dispatch Department informed about incidents they see so dispatchers can route other buses around problems where possible.

The dispatch team is dedicated to keeping our buses moving in a safe and efficient manner, always aiming to keep our customers moving forward with top-quality service.

Gainesville to Pentagon

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route carried an average of about 180 daily passengers—right in line with PRTC’s projections.

Along with offering existing customers a new option, PRTC expects the Pentagon route to attract passengers who currently drive alone, as the Gainesville-Washington route did. That service began with eight daily trips but has grown to 13 trips per day to meet demand.

The Gainesville-Pentagon route offers four weekday trips in the mornings and four return trips in the afternoon/evenings from the Limestone Drive Commuter Lot, with overflow parking available at the adjacent Gainesville United Methodist Church. The new route does not serve the Cushing Road Commuter Lot because of capacity issues. Plans for I-66 call for expanded commuter parking in the Gainesville/Prince William Parkway area prior to the start of construction.

“OmniRide is providing new options for commuters. By offering direct routes to Washington and the Pentagon from both Manassas and Gainesville, we’re giving people in western Prince William the ability to choose the departure time and location that works best for them,” Principi said.
First Transit, PRTC’s contract service provider, recognizes one outstanding operator each month and one outstanding technician each quarter. Additionally, an Operator of the Year is named annually. If you have a compliment about First Transit personnel, please tell us!

Operator of the Month

Dawit Solomon - July 2016
Mr. Solomon has operated buses at PRTC since June 2013 and is currently assigned to OmniRide trips serving Lake Ridge, Dale City and Montclair as well as trips on the Prince William Metro Direct route. A native of Africa, he currently lives in Woodbridge and is married with children. He says he truly enjoys operating buses and helping passengers.

Gwen Robinson - August 2016
A Lake Ridge resident, Ms. Robinson has operated buses at PRTC since May 2003. She currently is assigned to trips on the Manassas OmniLink route. She says the best part of her job is driving, assisting and meeting people. Ms. Robinson requested that her photo not be included.

Mohamed Elatrebi - October 2016
Originally from Egypt, Mr. Elatrebi has lived in the Prince William area for the past 15 years. He started operating buses at PRTC in December 2006 and is currently assigned to OmniRide trips serving Montclair and Dale City as well as to trips on the Prince William Metro Direct route. He is married with three children and says he likes to pray with his family and make money.

Ronald Dixon-Nelson - September 2016
His hobby is science, but Mr. Dixon-Nelson says he likes having the opportunity to travel around the area in his job. He is currently an extra board operator—ready to step up and fill in on any route necessary. Originally from Washington, D.C., Mr. Dixon-Nelson now lives in Woodbridge and has been operating buses at PRTC since August 2015.

Zinash Grbru - November 2016
Ms. Grbru has operated buses at PRTC since November 2014 and is currently assigned to trips on the Dale City, Lake Ridge, Manassas and Montclair OmniRide routes. She is originally from Ethiopia but now lives in Woodbridge. She is married, has two sons and says she enjoys spending time with her family and cooking. The thing she likes best about her job is safely getting her passengers where they need to go.

Upcoming Events

PTC Board Meeting
January 5, 2017 at 7 p.m.
PTC Transit Center
14700 Potomac Mills Road, Woodbridge

PTC Board Meeting
February 9, 2017 at 7 p.m.
PTC Transit Center
14700 Potomac Mills Road, Woodbridge
Each winter, PRTC issues its updated Emergency Service Plan (ESP) so passengers will understand how the bus services operate under emergency conditions. Those emergencies are often weather-related, but we occasionally implement ESP because major roads are shut down or in response to unpredictable events in our nation’s capital.

Our goal is always to operate regular service, but we also need to ensure the safety of our passengers, personnel, and vehicles and deliver a dependable service.

When ESP is in effect:
- OmniRide buses serve most local stops but travel only to and from the Franconia-Springfield and Tysons Corner Metrorail stations;
- Metro Direct and Cross County Connector buses operate regularly, as conditions allow; and
- OmniLink buses implement some changes to local routing and do not perform off-route trips.

During winter weather events, it’s typically clear why ESP would be in effect. But passengers sometimes question why ESP is implemented at other times, such as for the National Christmas Tree Lighting.

Those of you who are long-time customers know the explanation is that the closure of key roads in the heart of our Washington service area causes extreme gridlock. Our buses literally used to spend hours stuck in traffic and arrive at stops with no capacity. And because many of our buses make multiple trips during rush hours, serving customers early during the rush hour and then returning to make a second trip, these delays caused subsequent trips to be late or missed.

Another question we’re often asked is why ESP is implemented for routes that are not impacted by a particularly emergency. For example, why are routes to the Mark Center, Pentagon, and Tysons on ESP when traffic problems are confined to DC?

First, consistency is the key to ensuring that the ESP runs as smoothly as possible. Attempting to tailor an ESP response for each situation would be a recipe for confusion among passengers, dispatchers, bus operators, and supervisors that would inevitably lead to our inability to deliver an acceptable level of service.

Additionally, the time needed to develop tailored plans would be prohibitive. During an emergency, time is of the essence and by having a standard easy-to-understand plan, we are able to provide predictable, adequate service and keep our passengers moving.

The November 2016 ESP brochure is now available on our website, or you can grab a copy on your bus.