

Transit Ridership Increases In Region

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TRANSIT, From B1

transit is growing," Fay said. "But an increase in something that's small is still something small. . . . [Transit advocates] may be dancing in their bacchanal, but I'm calling for some rational thinking."

In the Washington area, growth last year was particularly strong on Metrorail, Virginia Railway Express and commuter buses that run between Maryland and Virginia suburbs and the District.

Metrorail posted a growth rate of 6.8 percent, making it the second-fastest growing subway in the country behind Los Angeles, which had a 60 percent jump because of a new rail extension.

The January 2001 opening of five stations on Metrorail's Green Line drove at least half of the system's ridership growth. New riders have flocked to the stations, in the District and Prince George's County, and are generating about 40,000 additional daily trips on Metro.

Metrorail ridership plunged sharply after Sept. 11, when tourists abandoned the city, but has been rebounding. This month, passengers are making an average of 677,386 trips each weekday.

"It's very impressive," said Alan E. Pisarski, a nationally known specialist in commuting patterns who added that immigration is another factor fueling Metrorail ridership. "There's an increasing influx of lower-income people, minorities and immigrants who are more transit-oriented. That's one of the things we're catching here."

Another significant factor is Metrochek, the monthly transit subsidy provided to workers by most federal agencies and many private employers. Last year, 8,754 passengers began receiving Metrochek, including Ronald F. Kirby, chief transportation planner at the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments.

Before Metrochek, his commute from Alexandria to the District cost either \$4 for a round-trip Metro ride or \$8 for downtown parking. "Now transit fare is free to me," Kirby said. "I used to be a transit user who would occasionally drive my car. Now I never drive my car."

Metro fares have also remained flat since 1995, making the subway more attractive than the escalating cost of driving and parking, Kirby said.

Commuter buses in the region also drew significant numbers of new riders last year. Buses run by Maryland that connect the District with Frederick, Howard

County, Southern Maryland and Annapolis grew by 17 percent. Omni-Ride buses, which connect Northern Virginia with the District, had a 29 percent increase in boardings.

VRE, which turns 10 years old this year, had a 17 percent increase in boardings last year to become the fifth-fastest growing commuter railroad in the country.

Unlike many other mass transit systems, VRE enjoyed record ridership immediately after Sept. 11, when tightened security at the Pentagon and military bases caused extreme backups on roads in Northern Virginia. VRE ridership spiked from about 10,500 daily passengers to 14,500. Ridership now hovers around 12,300, and passengers are having to stand during peak hours on one-third of VRE's 30 daily trains between Washington and Northern Virginia, railroad managers say.

"More and more, people are saying if you give us an alternative, we're going to take it," said Laura Olsen of the Coalition for Smarter Growth. "We're going to continue to see transit ridership go up and up as traffic gets worse in the Washington area."

Fay argued that transportation spending shouldn't favor transit.

"When you put more into any mode of transportation than it deserves, there's a price to pay," he said. "This is a city that has built one new road in last 30 years—Route 66. We build a magnificent rail system, we lead the nation in carpooling, and yet, because we haven't invested in roads, we have the second-most congested region. It's causing us to lose productivity, it's killing people, worsening our air quality, getting us away from our families."

Mass Transit Growth

Regional mass transit ridership grew three times the national average last year, contributing to a record 9.5 billion trips made by Americans nationwide on transit systems.

Subway systems	Ridership growth rate last year
Los Angeles	60.6%*
Washington	6.8**
Chicago	3.0
Cleveland	2.5
New York	1.7

* Opened a new line. ** Opened new stations.

Commuter rail	
Burlington, Vt.	3,645.8%*
Seattle	535.3**
Dallas	75.3
San Jose	26.4
Virginia Railway Express	16.9

* New system ** New lines added

Bus	
Denver	72.8%
Phoenix	62.8
Philadelphia	45.1
Suburban Maryland	17.3
Los Angeles	11.7

(Washington ranks 9th with 4.2% growth.)

SOURCE: American Public Transportation Association

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