

Section 5: Conclusions

A diverse population benefits from the services of the five transit agencies that operate exclusively in the area of the Northern Virginia Transportation Commission. This is the general finding from a survey conducted of riders on these systems during the late spring and summer of 2000. The five agencies are: Fairfax Connector, DASH, CUE, Loudoun, and ART.

Rider Demographics

A slight majority of riders are female (54 percent), and just over half of all riders (52 percent) are under age 35. By ethnicity or race, the largest group is whites (46 percent). Black/African Americans are 32 percent of the riders on the five systems. The average household income for the riders is almost \$50,000, and 59 percent of riders come from households with incomes over \$30,000. Only 26 percent of riders have household incomes under \$20,000. Most riders (57 percent) have at least one private vehicle in their households. Most riders (58 percent) had full-time jobs; another 11 percent worked part time, and 15 percent were students (a high rate considering that the survey occurred outside of the regular school year).

For most of the demographic characteristics, there are significant differences among the five agencies. The express buses operated by the Loudoun system are a particular exception. Almost all Loudoun riders work full time, (94 percent), have incomes over \$30,000 (96 percent), are white (85 percent), and most riders have at least one car (71 percent). Loudoun riders also tend to be more male (63 percent) and older than the five system average (72 percent are over age 35). CUE riders have a higher than average share of students (19 percent). DASH has a higher percentage of blacks/African Americans (40 percent). The average Fairfax Connector is wealthier than that on DASH or CUE, but is still well below that carried on the Loudoun buses. The individual systems are also not monolithic in their rider characteristics. Riders served by Fairfax Connector's Huntington Division tend to be lower income, more heavily minority, and more captive to transit than those served by the agency's Reston/Herndon Division.

Trip Characteristics

The survey asked a series of questions about the particular trip made by the respondent. Most trips were part of the commute (59 percent), and most of the rest (23 percent) were for other trips with one end at the home. The percentage of trips for commute purposes is, of course, heaviest during the weekday peak hours (when it is 67 percent of trips). On Saturdays the bus still serves 27 percent commute trips, and even on Sundays, the journey between home and work accounts for 23 percent of rides. Despite auto ownership in the household, 63 percent report that they had no personal auto available for the surveyed trip. This rate is higher outside the peak periods (77 percent for trips during weekday evenings) and lower during the weekday peaks (59 percent). These rates suggest that, overall, the agencies still have a high share of "choice" riders--i.e., those for whom the bus was not the sole alternative.

Most riders paid by cash (67 percent), and only one third (34 percent) made their trip without a transfer to another transit bus or train. Overall, 24 percent of trips had to transfer more than once. The survey also asked respondents to estimate their door-to-door travel time for the surveyed trip. Only 14 percent of trips took less than 20 minutes; while 60 percent of the trips took 40 minutes or more. Again there are differences between the overall averages and the characteristics of trips on the individual systems.

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Loudoun is again the big anomaly. Its trips are very heavily commute-oriented (as is its service). The method of payment is heavily ticket/token, and a very high share of the Loudoun trips (89 percent) take longer than an hour door-to-door.

Features Riders Want Improved

Riders want more frequent service, better on-time arrival, and longer hours of service. These features ranked one, two, and three (respectively) out of 15 features that respondents could choose as needing to be improved. Fares were among the top three priorities for only 5 percent of riders (although the rate was 19 percent for riders on the Loudoun buses).

Overall attitude toward transit services

Finally, consider how riders rate the overall quality of transit services. The survey asked riders to provide distinct ratings for overall service on bus and on rail transit. The results, shown in Exhibits 5-1 and 5-2, are mostly positive. For overall bus service, 67.9 percent rated the service "very good" or "good," compared against only 17.5 percent who considered the bus service "poor" or "very poor." (Another 14.6 percent gave the bus service a "neutral" rating or had no opinion.) The best ratings for bus service came from riders on the express, commuter, and suburban local services. Radial line haul and urban feeder/distributor services had lower ratings, although the overall ratings for these services were still favorable. Saturday bus service elicited the highest negative ratings: 29.9 percent of riders rating the service as poor or very poor.

Rail service received almost the same ranking as did the NVTC area buses. The opinion about overall rail service was mostly positive: 65.4 percent rated it as "good" or "ver good," while 18.5 percent rated the service as "poor" or "very poor."

Note that Exhibits 5-1 and 5-2 include a set of values to the right of each chart. These are average scores, calculated based on a scale where 1 is very good to 5 is very poor.