

BACON'S REBELLION

The Op/Ed Page for Virginia's New Economy

Vanquishing the Density Demon

There's no reason that higher density has to mean worse traffic congestion. In the face of population growth and commercial development, Arlington County has kept its streets gridlock-free.

You start to understand how seriously Northern Virginians take their commuting when you step into one of the three Commuter Stores in Arlington County. Set in typical retail locations -- the Crystal City store is located directly across from the Hamburger Hamlet -- these shops are jam-packed with information about different ways to get around Arlington and the rest of the metro area.

Want Metro rail schedules? Got 'em. Want bus schedules for every bus system in the region? Got 'em. Want info about car-sharing services like ZipCar and FlexCar? Got it. If you're a technophile, you soak up information through PCs, digitized maps or watch video commercials displayed on big-screen TVs. If you crave human interaction, a store clerk can walk you through the choices.

The three stores, located in Rosslyn, Ballston and Crystal City, generate about 250,000 visitors per year -- in a jurisdiction of 200,000. Remarkably, 40 percent of the patrons don't even live or work in Arlington. They come because the stores make it so easy to find the information they're looking for. The stores also sell about \$7 million in rail and bus tickets annually.

Arlington County doesn't operate the stores for profit -- it provides them as a service. The

goal, explains Chris Hamilton, commuter services chief for the county, is to provide the information that people need to get out of their cars. "My group's mission is all about providing accurate and timely information and service to make it easy for people to use options like transit, biking and walking. We try to get people to change their behavior."

The Commuter store is just one of the tools Arlington County uses to combat traffic congestion. Arlington is the leading jurisdiction in Virginia -- and a pace-setter nationally -- in creating innovative alternatives to the auto-centric society. It has come as close as anyone to finding the formula for reconciling population growth, commercial development and quality of life.

In contrast to most urban-core jurisdictions, Arlington's population is growing -- faster than one percent per year since 2000. What's more, Arlington is

growing up, not out, which means that population density is increasing. At 7,700 inhabitants per square mile, Arlington's density is exceeded in Virginia only by Alexandria's. It is three times that of neighboring Fairfax County.

Remarkably, new development is concentrated overwhelmingly in the 11 percent of the land that is zoned commercial. Since 1970, the square footage of office space in the Ballston-Rosslyn corridor has increased from 5.5 million square feet to 20.5 million, the number of jobs from 22,000 to 90,000 and the number of residential units from 7,000 to 26,200. Developer proposals for that kind of focused, high-density growth are normally met with fear and loathing across Virginia. In the public mind, density = congestion. But, as Arlington has irrefutably demonstrated, density need not create congestion at all.

The proof is in the numbers. While secondary roads across Virginia are clogging up with more traffic, several Arlington thoroughfares have seen less traffic over the past 10 years. Most show modest growth, averaging around 1/2 percent per

The Commuter Store in Crystal City



Street Segment	Street Type	1996	2001	2006	% Change 1996-2006
Lee Hwy - Rosslyn	EW 6-lane arterial	37,770	33,632	32,428	-14.1%
Wash. Blvd - VA Sq.	EW 4-lane arterial	20,469	19,478	18,069	-11.8%
Clarendon Blvd.	EW 2-lane 1-way arterial	13,980	14,199	14,539	4%
Wilson Blvd. - Clarendon	EW 2-lane 1-way arterial	16,368	16,265	13,797	-15.8%
Arlington Blvd.	EW 6-lane arterial	55,865	63,272	60,223	7.8%
Glebe Road - Ballston	NS 6-lane arterial	35,230	39,409	35,900	1.2%
G. Mason Drive - west of Ballston	NS 4-lane arterial	20,002	22,578	23,386	16.9%

This table from an Arlington County Power-Point presentation shows how traffic has declined or stabilized in selected arterial streets over the past 10 years.

year. Admittedly, some major traffic corridors like Interstate 66 are overloaded, but they facilitate regional traffic flows for the most part and are funded, designed and maintained by the Virginia Department of Transportation.

To understand how Arlington has vanquished the density demon, it is necessary to look at three distinct but interrelated sets of policies: (1) Creating transportation options, (2) enforcing appropriate land use policies, and (3) marketing the one-car lifestyle to citizens.

Arlington enjoys a significant asset that few Virginia localities can match: ten stations in the Washington Metro heavy rail system. Five reside in the oft-celebrated Ballston-Rosslyn corridor, and five are located in a line that runs from Washington National Airport, past the Pentagon, to Arlington Cemetery.

Some may argue that the existence of the subway makes Arlington useless as a model for other jurisdictions. But remember three things. First, heavy rail is not a panacea. The presence of Metro has made little difference to congestion in neighboring Fairfax County. Second, other communities are contem-

plating Transit Oriented Development: notably, in Norfolk and along the Virginia Railway Express in Northern Virginia. Third, as Paul Ferguson, chairman of the Arlington County Board of Supervisors, points out, it's entirely possible to promote "smart growth" in neighborhoods served by bus, not rail, as evidenced by what Arlington has done in the Shirlington Town Center. (See "[Libraries as Librators](#)" for a discussion of redevelopment in Shirlington.)

As an integral player in the Metropolitan Washington Area Transit Authority, Arlington enjoys the benefit of regional bus service as well as heavy rail. Plus, the county has upped its commitment to bus transit, operating its own system of smaller, feeder buses. Serving routes that Metro doesn't, the ART (Arlington Transit) buses -- they're big vans, really -- funnel passengers to Metro stations and to stops on Metro bus routes.

Arlington also has invested in bicycle infrastructure: 36 miles of multi-use, off-street trails and 50 miles of on-street connecting bicycle routes. The county goal is to build a 111-mile system within 20 years. To encourage cycling, the county requires de-

velopers to include bike racks in their projects and, in new projects, to equip office buildings with shower facilities where cyclists can change from their biking clothes into their work clothes.

But simply providing the rail service, buses routes and biking amenities will not get people to use them. Transportation facilities must be integrated with each other, and with the urban fabric. As Bob Brosnan, director of the county planning department, puts it, "We wanted a transportation system, not just a commuter rail line running through our community."

Density around the Metro stations is key. People are generally willing to walk a quarter mile to catch the Metro. That means filling the space around the Metro stations with buildings, not parking lots. Arlington has encouraged "pyramid" style development around its Metro stations, in which the tallest buildings are clustered around the station, and buildings drop in height the nearer they get to surrounding neighborhoods of single-family houses.

Arlington County encourages mixed uses: office buildings apartment/condominium buildings, with restaurants, shops and services accessible in street-level store-fronts. Adding 19,600 housing units since 1980, the Ballston- Rosslyn corridor accounts for most of the county's residential growth. Planners and developers work hand-in-glove to create street-scapes where people feel comfortable walking, sitting and congregating. The five Metro

station areas in the Ballston-Rosslyn corridor are adorned with wide sidewalks, shade trees, mini-plazas and pocket parks. Corridor streets are narrow, with no more than four lanes of moving traffic, and speed limits are low -- crossing the street on foot is a normal experience, not an intimidating one. Although the county provides limited on-street parking, there are very few parking lots - most parking is located underneath the buildings.

The result is a string of urban islands where people can reach many of their destinations -- including the Metro -- on foot. According to Arlington County statistics, 10 percent of the people living in the Ballston-Rosslyn corridor walk to work. The number for the county as a whole is six percent -- about six times the national average. (The bicycling program, by contrast, has yet to make a serious dent. The percentage of Arlington workers biking to work is about one percent, in line with national averages.)

Infrastructure and land use are critical, but there's one more essential step: marketing. Americans are so accustomed to relying on their automobiles, they need some hand-holding to learn how to use the subway and bus. That's where Chris Hamilton's commuter services come in. Arlington County aggressively markets the transit alternatives. Besides supporting the three commuter stores, Arlington maintains an elaborate website, a call center and an outreach program with major employers.

The employer outreach program is particularly effective. The county's Arlington Transportation Partners program encompasses 600 companies, representing about 125,000 employ-

ees or two-thirds of the workforce. The county works with the companies to set up programs to encourage Metro ridership and telework. "There are all kinds of business reasons why an employer should care about an employee's commute," says Hamilton. Employee productivity and health are foremost among them

Recently, the county has designed three different types of kiosks that employers can install in their buildings: stand-alones, desktop models and wall-mounted models. Employers can pick the one that works the best. Displays provide a map of Arlington, a map of the immediate vicinity and schedules of local routes. Commuters can pick up fliers, which the county keeps scrupulously stocked, or access more information on the Internet.

A common thread of Arlington's outreach program is promoting the one-car lifestyle: Save money by driving less. With the average cost of automobile ownership accounting for 17 percent of household expenditures in 2001, the county pitches, Arlingtonians can stretch their paychecks by getting rid of a car.

County numbers show that households in the Ballston-Rosslyn corridor own 1.13 vehicles on average, versus 1.53 in the rest of the county. Thirty-eight percent of Ballston-Rosslyn corridor residents used public transit to get to work, according to 2000 Census statistics, compared to 10.4 percent in the "inner suburbs." As noted previously, 10 percent walk to work.

In another indicator that the Arlington model reduces the number of automobile trips,

Metro ridership continues to surge, decades after the rail system was built, as new development adds offices, apartments and condos within walking distance of Metro stations. The chart below shows the gains at four of the five stations in the Ballston-Rosslyn corridor. In total, the *increase* in Metro ridership eliminates more than 45,000 automobile trips each day.

Average Daily Ridership		
	1991	2006
Rosslyn	13,637	31,662
Court House	5,561	14,199
Clarendon	2,964	8,190
Ballston	9,482	24,150
Total	31,644	78,201

Arlington's one-car lifestyle isn't for everyone, but its appeal is growing. In his book, "How to Live Well Without Owning a Car," author Chris Bailish contends that Americans can save \$25,000 to \$30,000 over a five-year period by dispensing with just one car. And that doesn't include the health advantages of walking/cycling more or the environmental benefits of burning less gasoline. The county was so taken by Bailish' message that it partnered with him to re-publish the book with a chapter devoted to car-free living in Arlington County.

The message seems to be sinking in as Arlingtonians discover that they truly can live with a single car. (See "[Loving the One-Car Lifestyle](#)," in the *Bacon's Rebellion* blog.) A measure of the growing trend is the growing market for Zipcar and Flexcar, companies that provide hourly car rental services for those occasions when subscribers just absolutely have to have a car. Between them, the two companies have nearly 4,000 customers in Arlington, says

Hamilton. The county provides on-street parking where the cars are parked between jaunts. Demand has gotten so strong that the county is planning to double the number of car-sharing slots on the streets.

It should be clear to any open-minded observer that Arlington County has tackled the traffic congestion problem more successfully than anyone else in Northern Virginia. If you don't find the traffic statistics convincing, take the trouble, as I did, to spend a day -- including rush hour -- driving and walking around the Ballston-Rosslyn corridor.

The big question is this: How much does it all cost? Heavy rail, buses and commuter stores don't come free. If Arlington County is subsidizing alternative transportation, how much comes out of the pockets of county taxpayers?

According to Arlington Communications Director Diana Sun, the major expenses can be summarized as follows:

vides a reasonably fair account of what Arlington taxpayers are paying.

The expenditures for Fiscal 2008 work out to about \$120 per Arlington County resident. If you're a dual-income family that can dispense with one of its two automobiles costing \$5,000 a year, the \$240 you pay in taxes represents one heck of a positive cost-benefit ratio, even after deducting for the cost of Metro fares and car-sharing rentals. If you're a family of four living in a traditional two-story house on a traditional tree-lined street, the payback on your \$480 tax contribution isn't so direct. But the benefits are tangible nonetheless: Streets are less congested than in neighboring jurisdictions.

If \$120 per capita still sounds like a lot of money, compare it to the roughly \$200 per resident per year that Northern Virginians will begin taxing themselves, under newly enacted legislation, to fund road and highway improvements. Even proponents concede that the spending program will only blunt

ing low-density "suburban" districts into Arlington-style "urban" districts can help alleviate gridlock. Rather than block high-density development on the grounds that it will aggravate traffic congestion, as many neighborhood groups do, citizens should focus on making sure the development is done right. They need go no farther than Arlington County to see how.

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By James A. Bacon

To read more by James A. Bacon, visit www.baconsrebellion.com

Local Tax Support for Alternate Transportation (in thousands of dollars)

	FY 2006	FY 2007	FY 2008
Metro Rail and Bus	13,000	14,700	17,400
Local Bus (ART)	7,331	6,382	6,614
Commuter Services	538	186	186
Total	20,869	21,268	24,200

It's important to note that those numbers may understate the total subsidy for alternate transportation. They don't include state or federal contributions to the programs, or miscellaneous items such as the in-kind value of providing free parking spaces to Zipcar and Flexcar. But it pro-

the inevitable increase in congestion, not reduce it.

The important lesson that Arlington teaches is this: Density need not create congestion. Poorly conceived re-development projects may well create problems, but transform-