Getting Around the Area

- Post Reprint: 10 things that will change commuting in the D.C. region during 2015
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Whether walking or riding a bicycle around the neighborhood, taking the Metro or riding in the family car, one is aware of traffic, road and sidewalk conditions, and how precious time is.

Media provides transportation news, explains mass transit developments and aids decisions. Dr. Gridlock and other *Washington Post* transportation reporters cover the diverse transportation issues that exist in the urban, suburban and rural areas of the D.C. region.


Columnists provide insight and guidance. Look to On Wheels for vehicle reviews. And to special sections such as Sunday’s Real Estate, Thursday’s Local Living and Friday’s Weekend guide. Read the articles and do the activities inside. They all come from these sections.

*The Washington Post* helps you to decide where to go, what to do and how to get around the area.
It’s a rare year when ribbons are cut on major new highways and transit lines. This year will be a more typical mix of smaller — but still significant — additions to the local travel network.

Travelers looking for those bright spots should also be prepared for some developments that will at least temporarily slow their trips. Here’s a top 10 list of the good and the bad, starting with one that might get ugly.

16th Street bridge. This is really going to hurt. The District Department of Transportation must rebuild the span that takes 16th Street NW over Military Road NW. Military Road gets a good share of east-west traffic, but 16th Street is a major north-south commuter route.

The project began in fall, and the work is most visible along Military Road. But the big, painful phase of lane and ramp closings is set to begin in late February and last nearly four months.

Project manager Paul Hoffman said DDOT hopes to divert 8,000 vehicles a day from the work zone. But 16th Street is hemmed in by Rock Creek Park on its west side. Look for extensive traffic delays.

New Metrorail cars. Ah, much better. The new Metrorail cars, known as the 7000 series, are scheduled to start entering service early this year. They promise relief for door and brake problems that plague older cars in the fleet.

But what commuters are most likely to notice are the new displays inside that let riders know which stations they are approaching.

A more subtle but significant change in train operation also is coming in 2015.

The transit authority plans to restore automatic operation, starting with the Red Line. Trains have been driven by the operators in the front cabs since automatic operation was suspended after the 2009 Red Line crash.

D.C. streetcars. The start of streetcar service along H Street and Benning Road in Northeast Washington was supposed to have been a top transportation story of 2014. This time, we can’t miss.

In May, Metro workers tested the new 7000 series subway cars at the Shady Grove station. The “back doors” of the new cars are set closer toward the center to encourage riders to move to the short end of the car.
carrying passengers and avoiding collisions with other traffic would do much to inspire confidence in a surface-transportation concept that took quite a beating with the cancellation of Arlington County’s Columbia Pike route in 2014.

**Transitions.** Richard Sarles retires as Metro’s general manager. Sarles launched Metro’s aggressive, and still-unfinished, rebuilding program, defending it against criticism from some passengers that it was disrupting weekend travel without significantly improving weekday rides.

Although many Metro riders still couldn’t pick Sarles out of a lineup, his impact on their commutes has been enormous and will extend far beyond his tenure.

In Maryland, Larry Hogan becomes governor, having already struck fear into advocates for the Purple Line light-rail link planned for Montgomery and Prince George’s counties. The Republican governor-elect has balked at the cost of the long-planned Purple Line and indicated that he generally favors road projects over transit.

**Interstate 66.** As the Virginia government warms up to the idea of adding high-occupancy toll lanes to I-66, commuters will have their first experience with a Virginia Department of Transportation program called Active Traffic Management.

A system of sensors, cameras and signs along the interstate will alert drivers to problems and advise corrective action. It’s an experiment in behavior modification. Active management makes the highway smarter, but it works best when the drivers also act smart.

**95 Express Lanes.** The opening in December was just the beginning of a long story for the region’s transportation system. These HOT lanes are different from the Capital Beltway system because they come with a preexisting customer base of carpoolers, who now must share space with a new market of solo drivers willing to pay tolls.

Add in a toll that varies with the level of traffic and you’ve got the most complicated travel system in the D.C. region. Commuters will travel along that learning curve in 2015.

**Gainesville interchange.** The interchange construction on Route 29 just south of Interstate 66 in Gainesville is one of the biggest transportation projects in Virginia. Begun in 2010, it’s scheduled to be completed this summer.

The finished product will eliminate a surface-level road and rail junction that was infamous among commuters.

**Third Street Tunnel.** It turns out that the Capitol Crossing developer can’t completely shut Interstate 395 to 90,000 vehicles a day without an impractically long period of study. But the developer still plans to put a deck over the interstate, a feat that can’t be accomplished without disrupting the traffic on this major commuter artery in the middle of the District.

Drivers should brace for extra-long trips because of lane closings in 2015 — and beyond.

**Spot improvements.** Big changes like the opening of express lanes are rare. More common are spot improvements to interstates. They stretch out merge lanes or open shoulders to rush-hour traffic.

On I-66 inside the Beltway, VDOT will connect the Washington Boulevard on-ramp to the off-ramp at the Dulles Airport Access Road, creating a one-mile auxiliary lane for westbound traffic.

Also scheduled to wrap up is the VDOT work on the Beltway’s inner loop north of Tysons Corner. At rush hours, the left shoulder will be open to traffic, providing brief relief south before drivers reach the American Legion Bridge.

**Pedestrian bridge.** Commuters on the east side of the Red Line have watched the progress on this project, which when completed in 2015 will provide a pedestrian and bike link over the railroad tracks at Rhode Island Avenue NE.

In addition to providing a safe crossing between neighborhoods, the bridge will provide a route between the Metropolitan Branch Trail and the Rhode Island Avenue Metro station.

Although modest compared with some highway and transit projects wrapping up this year, the bridge exemplifies one of the most promising trends in transportation: the elimination of barriers that had boxed in pedestrians and bikers during the 20th century.

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Robert Thomson is The Washington Post’s “Dr. Gridlock.” He answers travelers’ questions, listens to their complaints and shares their pain on the roads, trains and buses in the Washington region.
Regional Maps and Transportation Projects

I-66 in Gainesville, Virginia

A motorist travels under a stalactite-riddled portion of the 16th Street Bridge at 16th Street and Military Road NW. The bridge will undergo a complete overhaul in early 2015.

H Street/Benning Road Streetcar Line, District of Columbia

BY GENE THORP/THE WASHINGTON POST

BY GENE THORP/THE WASHINGTON POST
Regional Maps and Transportation Projects

Powering the Purple Line, Maryland

For light rail vehicles to work, traction power substations are necessary to convert electric power to appropriate voltage and type. The Purple line plan calls for 20 substations to be placed every mile along the route.

Traction power substation locations

- 7 commercial
- 3 residential
- 2 industrial
- 2 institutional
- 4 vacant or wooded (close to residential)
- 2 at Lyttonsville and Glenridge maintenance facilities.

1. RESIDENTIAL
   Along Wayne Avenue, roughly one half mile east of downtown Silver Spring.

2. COMMERCIAL
   Parking lot of the Langley Park Shopping Center

3. VACANT/WOODED

Typical traction power substations

Substation structures range in size from approximately 15 by 52 feet to 22 by 60 feet and can be built in a variety of styles as these examples from light rail systems across the country show:

Source: Maryland Transit Administration; aerial images via Fictometry International
Fairfax County’s school bus fleet fight off the winter chill

By Kate Yanchulis
The Fairfax County Times

Originally Published January 22, 2015

Every year, Fairfax County school system’s transportation staff wages an uphill battle against the cold winter weather.

The school system must keep its fleet of 1,610 school buses ready to face the roads, but freezing temperatures create obstacles.

When the air temperature drops below 20 degrees, that marks the threshold where transportation operations specialist Joey Welborn knows he has to worry. Even with a special additive the school system adds to the fuel to guard against freezing, temperatures in the teens can cause the fuel to gel and clog bus fuel lines.

Last winter, approximately 150 school buses would not start one day in January thanks to single-digit temperatures.

Almost a year later, FCPS officials decided to cancel school on Jan. 8 due to similarly chilly weather affecting its buses.

“When freezing temperatures are predicted, we do have certain measures we put in place so we can get started in the morning,” FCPS director of transportation Francine Furby said.

Some days, though, the battle against the cold is one FCPS cannot win.

The school system has heat rails at some of its bus lots. Buses can plug into these and heat their engines over night, keeping the oil and fuel warm and making the buses easier to start in the mornings. But the school system only has enough heat rails to serve about 500 buses each night, less than a third of the fleet.

The school system services buses every 45 school days throughout the year, trying to keep the fleet in tip-top shape. But not every issue can be anticipated.

So when winter weather threatens, the school system also calls in its bus drivers 30 minutes early. Drivers arrive at their buses between 4:30 a.m. and 5 a.m. to get their vehicles started, Welborn said.

“That buys us enough time to ensure buses are out and on the road when they need to be,” Welborn said.

When buses will not start, the school system has 35 technicians ready for repairs, as well as other buses and alternate routes in place to try to ensure that no students are standing out at bus stops too long.

However, snowstorms can bring their own set of transportation issues that have nothing to do with the buses. On Tuesday, Jan. 6, Fairfax County schools were slammed for opening on time despite morning snow that snarled roads and led to buses being late for pickups.
“We’re more worried about road conditions than the buses,” Welborn said. “That’s our biggest fear for student safety.”

School Board member Elizabeth Schultz (Springfield) has two children that attend Robinson Secondary School who could not make it to school on Jan. 6. They ended up staying home with Schultz and their elementary school brother, who Schultz did not even attempt to send off to school.

Schultz then kept a close eye on the school system’s weather decisions for the next two days, sharing her concerns with facilities and transportation staff by email. On Wednesday, Jan. 7, knowing that sub-zero wind chills were predicted for Thursday morning, she stayed up all night monitoring the decision-making process.

The school system had declared a two-hour delay on Wednesday night. But when bus drivers showed up to their lots on Thursday, many buses had trouble starting.

“Bus drivers are the first people from FCPS to see your kids in the morning and the last person in the afternoons,” Schultz said. “We need to get feedback from them and our transportation staff, and that happened on Thursday.”

As a result, the school system decided to close school for the day.

“Snow decisions are never a shining moment for a school system,” Schultz said. “But I want a school system and a superintendent bold enough to make the decision to protect the safety of our kids.”
Behind the Scenes: Keep the School Buses Running

1. ______ Number of buses in Fairfax County Public Schools’ fleet
2. ______ Temperature when transportation officials begin to worry
3. ______ Number of buses that would not start on one day in January 2014
4. ______ Percent of total fleet that would not start that January day
5. ______ Days, interval between servicing buses
6. ______ Number of technicians needed to repair buses

7. What do transportation staff members do to keep buses running during very cold weather?

8. Describe the day of a bus driver when cold weather is anticipated.

9. What role might school board members play in transportation decisions?

10. If you were the student member of your school system’s school board, what recommendations would you make concerning student transportation?
Solve the Problem