

NVTC NEWS RELEASE

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September 28, 2001

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NVTC Releases On-Board Bus Survey

The Northern Virginia Transportation Commission (NVTC) released the results of an origin-destination bus study conducted among the transit systems within its jurisdictions of Arlington, Fairfax and Loudoun counties and the cities of Alexandria, Falls Church and Fairfax. The survey provides a clear picture of transit ridership, which will aid in the management of local bus routes and lead to improved customer service and the expansion of service to new markets.

The survey of Alexandria DASH, Arlington ART, city of Fairfax CUE, Fairfax Connector and Loudoun County Commuter Service covered all bus routes and time periods (weekdays and weekends). Over 4,400 riders were surveyed. Metrobus routes were surveyed separately and are not included in this report. Total ridership on the systems is about 34,000 on a typical weekday, with ridership defined as the number of one-way trips.

The survey provided critical feedback on a range of issues, including rider demographics, trip characteristics, areas of needed improvement and attitudes towards transit.

Survey Implications

Riders made their priorities clear: more frequent service, better on-time arrival and longer service hours. Fares ranked among the top three concerns for just five percent of riders. For riders who depend on public transit as their sole means of transportation to and from work and other commitments, as many do, these concerns are a critical matter. Transit providers must deliver, both to satisfy current riders and to attract new ones.

Interestingly, one-quarter to one-third of riders surveyed are "choice" riders, those who have an alternative means of transportation, yet choose to ride anyway. This finding may merit further study.

Sixty-eight percent of respondents rated local bus service to be "very good" or "good" as compared to 18 percent who rated it "poor" or "very poor." Positive ratings from transit users are not surprising. For those who do not ride the bus, their perceptions of the values and benefits of public transportation are more apt to be less positive: a recent Transportation Research Board publication (TCRP Report 63) found that those least familiar with public transportation gave it a lower rating (4.5 out of 10) than those most familiar with it (6.6 out of 10).

A reasonable conclusion is that the things that matter most to current bus riders – frequency of service, on-time performance and longer service hours – would also be significantly important to new and potential users. Transit providers must target aggressively these areas of opportunity.

Rider Demographics

- Slightly more than half (54 percent) of the area's riders are female, who tend to use routes that serve the most urbanized areas.
- 52 percent of riders are under age 35; 30 percent are aged 35 to 49. The elderly (over 65) and the very young (under 18) make up 4 percent and 11 percent of riders, respectively, contradicting a commonly held perception of the elderly and young as "captives" of public transit.
- Minority groups (collectively) and non-Hispanic whites are using transit in approximately equal numbers: African-Americans (32 percent), Hispanics (8 percent) and Asian-Americans (7 percent) make up 47 percent of riders; non-Hispanic whites make up 46 percent of riders.
- 58 percent of riders have full-time jobs.
- While transit attracts riders from all income levels, those from the more distant and affluent suburbs (e.g., Loudoun County) served by express bus service are more likely to come from households with incomes over \$100,000. Saturday riders have the lowest average household income at \$39,369.

Trip Characteristics

- 59 percent of trips are commute-related, and 82 percent either begin or end at the rider's home.
- For the surveyed trip, 63 percent of riders had no private transportation alternative. That number rises on weekday evenings (77 percent), Saturdays (78 percent) and Sundays (74 percent). The number of "choice" riders, those who have an alternative to riding the bus, is about one-quarter to one-third of ridership.
- Overall, one-third of trips (34 percent) were made using direct service, that is, without transferring.
- Nearly two-thirds of trips (60 percent) took more than 40 minutes, and 42 percent took over one hour.
- Only 22 percent of riders would cancel their trip if the bus were not available, with slightly more canceling on weekday evenings and weekends. The automobile is the most common alternative mode, at 29 percent, followed by traveling in a taxi (17 percent) or a friend's car (14 percent).

For more information or a copy of this report, call the Northern Virginia Transportation Commission at (703) 524-3322.