

All aboard! The Capital (Annapolis, MD) June 28, 2008 Saturday

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The Capital (Annapolis, MD)

June 28, 2008 Saturday

SECTION: FRONT; Pg. A1

LENGTH: 798 words

HEADLINE: All aboard!

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BODY:

Every day, thousands more people throughout the county are using buses and trains to get to work, apparently prodded by higher gasoline prices to change their commuting habits.

Maryland Transit Administration officials said average weekly ridership for bus services, light rail, MARC commuter train service, MTA taxis, metro and handicapped services in the state jumped 22.2 percent between July 2007 and April, the latest figures available.

The largest single increase in average weekday ridership was a 53 percent jump in the number of people using the MARC rail station at BWI Thurgood Marshall Airport, increasing from 1,342 every day in July 2007 to 2,060 in May.

"We don't know factually if it's tied to gas prices but one can make a pretty obvious assumption," said Cheron Wicker, an MTA spokesman.

Local buses showed the biggest jump, with ridership up 32 percent over the 10-month period.

Buses in Curtis Bay experienced a 19 percent increase in average weekday bus ridership during that same time period, and Riviera Beach had a 16.2 percent increase.

At the light rail line from Cromwell Station in Glen Burnie, the average weekday boardings rose 27 percent, from 1,384 in July 2007 to 1,760 in April. The Ferndale light rail station's weekday light rail boardings rose 8 percent over the same time period.

A one-way ticket on the light rail is \$1.60. A day pass is \$3.50.

"People see public transportation as a much better alternative to paying \$4 a gallon for gas and sitting in traffic," Ms. Wicker said.

On Thursday as Peter Beyer got off a bus to catch the 5:31 p.m. light rail train at Cromwell Station, he said he switched to public transit a month ago to save gas. "I'm probably saving about \$10 a week," he said.

He travels from Hampden in Baltimore to a job in Glen Burnie. Three or four times a week, he gets off at Cromwell Station and takes an MTA bus to his office on Baymeadow Drive. The commute is just under 20 miles by car.

Before he took public transportation, he was spending \$150 a month on gas. Now he spends less than \$100 a month on gas, and about \$40 on public transportation. Three of his co-workers have also made the switch.

Many commuters seem to be following in Mr. Beyer's footsteps.

For example, at the Odenton station, one of the MARC system's busiest, station agent Ken Ellsworth said he's seeing "quite a few new people coming through here.

"They say 'I'm tired of driving,'" Mr. Ellsworth said. "Our ridership has gone up, and some days we're so busy here, we don't count" the number of passengers.

Trains aren't the only place there's been growth, and MTA's commuter bus service, which takes Maryland residents to Washington, D.C., has seen a 13.8 percent rise from 13,844 average weekday riders in July 2007, to 15,761 in April. Dillon's Bus Service, the Hanover firm that runs several commuter lines under contract to the MTA, added three buses to commuter runs on June 1. Commuter buses in and out of Annapolis have seen a ridership increase of 15 percent.

"I think everyone initially thought gas prices would jump up and come back down," said County Councilman Ron Dillon Jr., the company's regional vice president. "People are realizing this might be a long-term situation and are looking for alternatives."

The company's Annapolis and Kent Island commuter stops each receive additional round trips with the added buses, and Kent Island got an additional express run. The company will be adding more buses to its Columbia service on Tuesday.

The MTA is aware of overcrowding and requested to expand some routes to the Maryland Board of Public Works, Ms. Wicker said. She added that the MTA plans on adding more buses to crowded routes as well.

The MTA also plans to improve its parking lots, with \$350,000 allotted for MARC and over \$5 million allotted for all other MTA parking.

Mr. Beyer said he'd like to see the MTA expand its service area, which may stop him from

driving to work one or two days a week when he has to run errands. He also would like to see bus frequency and reliability increased.

He drives to the light rail station a mile from his home because he would have to wait an hour to get a bus home.

Commuters aren't the only ones who are adjusting their routine to save money, the bus companies are trying to find new ways to conserve fuel as well.

Nelson Cross, operations manager for Dillon's Bus Service, said that, to save on fuel, the company is leaving buses at midday locations rather than taking them back to headquarters.

"We use over a million gallons of fuel each year," he said. "A very small increase in price dramatically effects us."

Whether or not gas prices drop, the recent influx of MTA passengers could give the MTA more long-term riders.

"Even if gas prices go down, I'll probably still do this for a while," Mr. Beyer said.

LOAD-DATE: June 30, 2008