THE RESTON EXPRESS BUS

A Case History of Citizen Action to Improve Urban Transportation

by Henry Bain
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Improving Transportation in the Washington Metropolitan Area

No. 1 -- REVERSE-FLOW EXPRESS BUS SERVICE
A Proposal for Improved Transit Service Between Inner-City Residential Areas of Washington, D.C. and Suburban Employment Centers in Montgomery County, Maryland

No. 2 -- THE RESTON EXPRESS BUS
A Case History of Citizen Action to Improve Urban Transportation

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FOREWORD

This is the second in a series of research reports by the Washington Center for Metropolitan Studies on the improvement of transportation in the Washington metropolitan area. These reports focus upon reforms in the management of the transportation system, which might produce significant improvements in travel conditions, in the near future and at moderate cost, for the more than two million people who travel every day in this area.

In this study, Henry Bain shows how some concerned citizens in the new town of Reston successfully launched a high-quality commuter bus service, with a little help from private enterprise and none from government. The history of the Reston bus service suggests that citizen action might accomplish many more improvements in transit service, if government agencies would use their powers and resources to support such efforts.

We hope that publication of this study will encourage other civic groups to follow the example of the Reston citizens, and will stimulate all levels of government to support such citizen initiative.

Royce Hanson
President
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are indebted to Karl J. Ingebritsen, who organized and led the citizen effort described in this report, for detailed information on the planning and operation of the Reston express bus service. Helpful comments on the Reston experience were offered from two different perspectives by James A. Barker, manager of industrial and commercial development of Gulf Reston, Inc., and S. A. DeStefano, president of the Washington, Virginia and Maryland Coach Company.

Carol A. Kimbrough, a former research assistant at the Center and a resident of Reston, assisted in the preparation of the case history.

Permission to reproduce maps was kindly granted by Gulf Reston, Inc. and the District of Columbia Department of Highways and Traffic. Photographs are by Daniels of Reston.

Henry Bain
Senior Associate
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I. INTRODUCTION

Transportation is one of the most costly -- and least satisfactory -- public services in our large urban areas. Though government agencies have spent millions of dollars on transportation studies and plans, and billions on construction of urban highways and (in a few cities) rapid transit, many residents of cities and suburbs still experience inordinate delay, inconvenience, and hazard in getting from one place to another.

Some of the deficiencies of our urban transportation systems can only be remedied by construction of major new facilities. But much improvement could be made, more quickly and cheaply, by better management of the existing facilities, however imperfect they may be. While government is spending large sums on long-term construction projects, it is surprisingly slow to invest in the management improvements that could produce faster, safer, more comfortable transportation for today's traveler.

Perhaps the time has come to enlist the travelers themselves in an effort to improve the management of the transportation system. Citizen participation is coming to be regarded as an essential element in many governmental functions, such as education and urban renewal. Why not involve motorists and transit riders in the decisions and actions that so greatly affect an important part of their daily lives?

At present, the principal form of citizen participation in the management of transportation services is the public hearing, which generally precedes decisions on such matters as adoption of new traffic regulations and increases in transit fares. There is also a substantial amount of unorganized participation in the form of complaints to public officials on traffic conditions and transit service.

It is surprising that motorists and transit riders have not organized to express more vigorously their wishes with respect to the management of transit service and street traffic. The motorists are represented by automobile clubs, which take an active interest in the work of the municipal traffic engineers. But very few motorists become involved in these activities, and transit riders are rarely organized at all.

The low level of participation is ironic, for these two large groups of citizens spend thousands of man-hours each day, congregated
at close quarters on the highways, in automobiles or buses, experiencing at first hand the inadequacies of the transportation system. Furthermore, a large amount of thinking about transportation problems takes place in the daily traffic jams and on the crowded buses, and a large amount of potential energy goes untapped. The management of the transportation system is not so abstruse a subject as to be beyond the comprehension of the typical traveler. In fact, the average motorist is perfectly willing to prescribe new traffic engineering arrangements (much to the annoyance of the professional traffic engineers), and the transit rider does not need a college degree in transit management to diagnose overcrowding or poor scheduling. But communication among the motorists in a traffic jam is physically impossible, and communication among transit riders is inhibited by social conventions. The result is that most of the ideas and energies of the travelers are dissipated in frustration, or possibly converted into hostility to be vented upon family or fellow workers at the end of the journey.

The performance of the transportation system might be considerably improved if the interests and enthusiasm of the people who use the system could be channeled constructively. The users know much more about the way the system is functioning, at any given time, than the small number of field engineers, patrolmen, and checkers employed by highway agencies, police departments and transit companies. The users also have time and energy which many of them might be willing to apply to the task of transportation improvement. The great problem is organization: How can the knowledge and the energy of the people who use the urban transportation system be constructively directed to the improvement of the system?

The potential benefits of effective citizen participation in public transit service appear to be especially great. The transit riders are even less organized than the motorists, and the task of organizing them would be simplified by the fact that a large proportion ride the same bus, or at least the same route, every workday.

The Washington Center for Metropolitan Studies, having research interests both in citizen participation and in urban transportation, has been on the alert for opportunities to study the possibilities of citizen action to improve transit service. Since early 1968 an example of such citizen initiative has been provided by the residents of the new town of Reston, Virginia (which is also a subject of research by the Center). The Reston Community Association has successfully organized and operated a daily bus service between the new town and downtown Washington, where previous attempts to introduce bus service in the conventional manner, without citizen participation, have failed.
This brief case history of the origin and first 15 months' operation of the Reston express bus service is published by the Center in the hope that it will stimulate other citizen groups to launch organized efforts to improve transit service for their communities. We also hope that publication of this account of the accomplishments of the Reston citizens to date, and of the obstacles with which they have had to contend, will move transit companies and public officials to encourage and assist such citizen initiatives, both in Reston and in other communities.
II. THE NEW TOWN AND ITS TRANSPORTATION PROBLEMS

Reston, Virginia is a new town under construction on 7,400 acres of land about 20 miles northwest of Washington, D.C. It is planned to contain homes for 75,000 persons, shopping centers, industry, office buildings, cultural and recreational facilities, and a large amount of open space.

Reston began with the purchase of this large tract in 1961 by Robert E. Simon, Jr. He commissioned the preparation of a town plan by distinguished architects, secured the necessary zoning approval by the government of Fairfax County, obtained a portion of the necessary financial backing, and began development of the first two villages and an industrial park.

The first village center, consisting of about 20 shops and offices on a plaza beside the newly made Lake Anne, was opened in December 1965, and was soon being visited by a steady stream of people from the Washington area and from many states and nations. The attractive and lively village center helped to create a high degree of community identification and spirit among the first several hundred families who moved into the groups of town houses of contemporary design, the high-rise apartment building beside the lake, and the single-family homes in Hunters Woods more than three miles away.

While the planning and architecture of the new town were widely acclaimed, the pace of sales and rentals was slow, and after five years of imaginative and diligent work Simon was unable to secure the additional financing needed to continue. The Gulf Oil Corporation, a principal investor in the enterprise, thereupon assumed financial and managerial control of Reston's development in October 1967. A new corporation, Gulf Reston, Inc., was formed to carry forward the development of the new town.

The new owners continued the development that was already under way while proceeding with the planning of additional villages, a town center, and more industrial sites. By June 1, 1969 the population of the new town had reached approximately 6,000 and about 2,000 persons were employed there. Prospects for continued development were favorable, as the steady growth of the Washington metropolitan area provided a strong market for housing, and employment in suburban industry and offices continued its rapid increase. Construction of a new headquarters for the U.S. Geological Survey, with 2,800 employees, was scheduled to begin soon.
Figure 1

Reston, Virginia
Location Map
While the Reston plan provides for a substantial amount of employment, so that many residents will eventually be able to work within the community, at least 80 percent of the employed persons living in Reston during its first few years worked elsewhere in the metropolitan area. The new town's labor force consisted largely of government employees, professional people, and businessmen who worked in downtown Washington or at locations just across the Potomac River in Arlington County, Virginia.1

Transportation between the new town and the rest of the metropolitan area, and especially the central employment area, was understandably a major concern of the developers and of Reston's first citizens. The situation was far from satisfactory. The principal highway approach to Reston, used by persons traveling from almost any point in the metropolitan area, was a six-and-one-half-mile stretch of Virginia Route 7, a two-lane rural highway whose numerous hills forced heavy traffic volumes to form long lines of slow-moving vehicles. Reconstruction to a four-lane width began in 1967, but until completion in June 1969 this simply added to the delays and hazards. While a high-quality network of freeways, parkways, and bridges connected Route 7 with the District of Columbia and the suburban areas of both Virginia and Maryland, all of the routes into the city were badly congested during rush hours.

During the first few years, the only alternative to the automobile for travel to and from Reston was an infrequent bus service into Washington, passing close to the Lake Anne Village Center but at a distance from most residential areas. The trip to downtown Washington cost $1.00 and consumed about 70 minutes, making numerous intermediate stops on a roundabout route. The service was practically useless for commuting from Reston to jobs in the city because there were no departures between 6:40 a.m. and 9:19 a.m., and the last return trip left the city at 4:41 p.m.2

1. It might be argued that Reston does not deserve the "new town" label since only a small proportion of its residents are employed there and its population is limited to the upper and upper-middle income groups. But Reston does meet other criteria for new town status, notably size, development in accordance with an overall design and schedule, and inclusion of employment (industry and offices) as well as residences. As Reston's population and employment grow, it will probably become less of an upper-income "bedroom community."

2. Bus service in Reston's part of the Virginia suburbs, and across the Potomac River into downtown Washington, is provided by the Washington, Virginia and Maryland Coach Company, a subsidiary of the D. C. Transit System, Inc. Despite its name, the company does not operate in Maryland.
The developers of Reston made several unsuccessful efforts to improve access to the new town. They repeatedly requested the Federal Aviation Agency to build an interchange connecting Reston with a freeway passing through the property, which links Dulles International Airport with the Capital Beltway and the George Washington Memorial Parkway leading into Washington. Access to this high-speed route in the inbound direction could reduce travel time to the city and the inner suburbs, but the Agency insisted that the freeway should be limited to traffic destined for the airport, so that rush-hour congestion would not hinder air travelers.

The developers also joined other groups in northern Fairfax County in an effort to preserve the right-of-way of the Washington and Old Dominion Railroad, a branch line extending northwestward from Alexandria, Virginia and passing through Reston. It had long been hoped that this line could be converted to rapid transit service, but a key portion of the right-of-way was finally taken by the state highway department for construction of a freeway.

The Reston management also made an attempt to secure direct bus service to and from downtown Washington during the commuting hours. In the early summer of 1966, shortly after the first residents began to move in, a questionnaire survey was conducted to identify people interested in commuting to Washington by bus. Those who expressed interest were invited to a meeting with representatives of the developer and the bus company.

While the small group of potential riders who attended the meeting were enthusiastic about express bus service, there was little or no agreement as to the time of departure or the route that the bus should follow. The president of the Washington, Virginia and Maryland Coach Company, S. A. DeStefano, told the group that he doubted that there were enough potential riders to warrant establishment of a peak-hour service to the city, but he was willing to make a bus available on a charter basis if the company were guaranteed against financial loss.

A small group of interested residents working with James A. Barker, a member of the developer's staff, devised a proposed route and schedule, and the Reston management decided to underwrite experimental operation of an express bus to Washington. This service, inaugurated in early November 1966, attracted only about seven commuters per day and was abandoned after two weeks, during which a deficit of over $400 was incurred.

3. The freeway has several suburban interchanges, but they only provide for travel from these points to the airport and back. Such an interchange is planned for Reston.
The failure of the experimental service did not quench the interest of Reston's citizens in improved bus service. In the ensuing months the population of the new town continued to grow, and the number of dissatisfied commuters increased apace. The daily trip to downtown Washington required at least 50 minutes of driving in congested traffic, and the journey to the large employment concentrations in Arlington County (notably the Pentagon and the fast-growing complex of office buildings in Rosslyn) took about 35 to 40 minutes. The idea of an express bus service, providing direct and non-stop travel between Reston and the central employment area at convenient times for commuters, was a topic of frequent conversation.

In May 1967 Pierce H. Gaver, Jr., a resident of Reston's village of Hunters Woods, conducted a new survey which revealed about 20 residents with an interest in express bus service to and from Washington. But this time the management of the new town, in the throes of the transition of ownership from Robert Simon to Gulf Reston, Inc., showed little inclination to take on any task not essential to the success of the development.
III. INAUGURATION OF EXPRESS BUS SERVICE
BY THE RESTON COMMUNITY ASSOCIATION

The way was paved for more vigorous citizen initiative in November 1967 when a group of Reston residents, motivated primarily by apprehension over the future of Reston under its new management, organized the Reston Community Association. The organizers intended that the association should serve as a vehicle by which the residents could participate in, and influence, the further development of the new town. The association's membership grew to 900 within a few months.

The interim board of directors of RCA decided that transportation should be one of the important concerns of the association and established a transportation committee. Karl J. Ingebritsen, a member of the interim board, was named chairman of the committee.

Early in December 1967, the transportation committee held an organizational meeting to recruit members for the committee and to identify possible activities. James Barker, now manager of industrial and commercial development for Gulf Reston, attended the meeting to brief the group on the developer's efforts to save the right-of-way of the Washington and Old Dominion Railroad for rapid transit. The possibility of establishing express bus service between Reston and Washington was also discussed, and interest in such a service was very strong.

For a few weeks after the December meeting, the attention of the transportation committee was focused on the W&OD Railroad battle. The committee took the first step toward establishment of express bus service after Christmas when chairman Ingebritsen contacted community leaders in the neighboring town of Herndon (a long-established community with a population of 3,800) in an effort to interest them in cooperating with RCA to launch an express bus to Washington. When officers of both the Herndon Chamber of Commerce and the Herndon Rotary Club responded favorably, it was decided to make the proposed express bus a joint Herndon-Reston enterprise.

During January 1968, detailed plans for an express service were made. Ingebritsen and Pierce Gaver decided to use Gaver's 1967 data as a basis for selecting a schedule that would serve a maximum number of people. They settled on a 7:40 a.m. departure from Reston, with a return trip leaving Washington at 5:15 p.m. The route, which originated in Herndon, was directed through the principal populated areas of Hunters Woods and Lake Anne Village. (See Figure 2.) This
Figure 2
Route of the Reston Express Bus in Reston

Bus route
• Bus stop
A Apartments
T Town houses
S Single-family houses

(Not to scale)
routing contrasted with that for the previous trial, which had picked up passengers only at the Lake Anne Village Center.

The plan was to run the bus non-stop from Reston to the office complex at Rosslyn, just across the Potomac from Washington. After dropping off Rosslyn passengers, the bus would proceed across the Theodore Roosevelt Bridge to Constitution Avenue. From that point to the end of the line the actual route of the bus through Washington was not set, but was to be determined by the destinations of the passengers and by traffic flow patterns.

The next step was to approach S. A. DeStefano, president of the WV&M Coach Company, with a request for the assignment of a bus to such an express run. As before, DeStefano doubted that such a service would pay its way, and was unwilling to provide the service as part of the company's regular, scheduled operations. However, he was willing and able to charter a bus to the RCA transportation committee, and he estimated the cost at $30 for a one-way trip, or $300 per week.

While many of their Reston neighbors had expressed a desire to ride an express bus to Washington, Ingebritsen and Gaver realized that only a small proportion of these people might actually leave their cars at home and board the first bus. The failure of the 1966 experiment was very much on the minds of the committee members, and they knew that ridership on new transit routes sometimes builds up slowly, as commuters gradually change their travel habits. Thus a substantial deficit might result from the first weeks or months of operation. For example, a daily patronage of only seven persons (the number attracted by the previous trial) at a one-way fare of one dollar (which seemed to be the maximum that might reasonably be charged) would produce a deficit of $230 in a single week. It was clear that Gulf Reston would not be willing to underwrite a deficit of this magnitude.

Another possible source of financial support was the homeowner's association in each village, which had been established to maintain the parks and open spaces and to enforce the protective covenants governing structures and uses. Each association collects a charge on each lot or apartment, initially set at $40 per year. The association's funds are available, after its maintenance and protective responsibilities are fulfilled, for expenditures "for the benefit of the property subject to these covenants and the owners and inhabitants thereof, and for the promotion of the peace, health, comfort, safety, or general welfare of the owners and inhabitants thereof." 4

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4. Deed of Dedication, Reston, Section One (March 25, 1964), Article II, paragraph 17.
While the associations already had a substantial amount of money at their disposal, they were still controlled by Gulf Reston, since voting was based on ownership of lots, and the board of directors originally established by the developer had not yet been replaced by citizen representatives. There seemed to be no more likelihood of a prompt agreement to subsidize the bus service from this source than from the developer's own funds.

The only other potential source of funds was the recently established Reston Community Association, but its annual membership dues of $1 per person were barely sufficient to cover the normal expenses of a civic association, and if the bus service were not successful, a single week's deficit might consume a large proportion of RCA's yearly income.

It therefore appeared essential to secure a stronger commitment from prospective riders than the casual assertion that they would travel by bus if service were provided. To obtain this commitment, Ingebritsen and Gayer decided to sell tickets in advance. The fare was set at $2 per round trip, and an effort was made to sell seven round-trip tickets to each prospective rider for the two-week experimental period. Refunds were guaranteed if the transportation committee failed to sell enough tickets to warrant inaugurating the service. All incoming money was deposited in the RCA treasury, and a record was kept of each purchaser's name and address and the number of tickets bought.

The transportation committee began by selling tickets to people who had already expressed an interest in riding the proposed bus. The response was encouraging, and the committee decided to set a date for the beginning of the service and publicize it more widely. In early February a flyer announcing that a two-week experimental service would begin on March 4, 1968 (if enough tickets were sold) was distributed to every Reston household by RCA. The involvement of a vigorous civic association was of great value at this stage. RCA had established a system for speedily reproducing and distributing announcements of community interest, which assured coverage of every household at a cost of about $30. The announcement was also carried in the Reston Times, the community's bi-weekly newspaper.

Additional help came from another of the new town's fledgling institutions. The Reston Foundation for Community Programs, which had been established by Robert Simon and continued by Gulf Reston, was a vehicle for launching social services and cultural activities such as a child care center and musical performances at Lake Anne Village Center. The foundation operated the community hall at the Village Center. Personnel at the community hall sold bus tickets during the first few days, reproduced a supply of timetables, and helped to publicize the bus service among residents who visited the hall.
Publicity in Herndon was less extensive, for lack of such organized promotion. The support by local civic groups was limited to an endorsement by their officers. The town government expressed much interest in the proposed bus service but maintained that it was unable to help even with the publicity. However, Richard F. Downer, the Herndon member of the express bus team, did distribute many copies of the announcement in Herndon.

The members of the committee hoped to sell enough tickets in advance to pay the full cost of the first week's service, so that they would be secured against loss while they were discovering how many riders would actually use the service during this critical period. Members of the committee worked hard during late February to sell tickets. Receipts quickly exceeded $100, but progress was slow beyond that point. As the final days of the ticket drive approached, it was clear that the amount of money necessary to guarantee break-even operation of the bus during the all-important first week would not be raised.

The dubious prospects of the proposed service were underscored by the fate of another suburb-to-city bus service during February. The developer of Sterling Park, a large subdivision farther out Route 7, conducted a survey of residents and received a large number of replies indicating a desire for bus service to Washington. He persuaded the WV&M Coach Company to establish a new route, offering a single morning and evening trip for a one-way fare of $1.25. The company printed special tickets for the service and began operation on February 2. The service was discontinued after four weeks, never having carried more than seven passengers on the 85-minute trip.

But the transportation committee members believed that the Reston service would be enabled to achieve better results by two assets that the Sterling Park service had lacked. They were confident that continued intensive promotion by residents of the community would convert many expressions of interest into actual ridership. And they were offering a direct, non-stop routing to the central employment area, whereas the Sterling Park bus had continued eastward on Route 7 to Seven Corners before turning toward the city, taking two sides of the triangle in order to carry people between Sterling Park and points in Falls Church and Arlington County.

Ingebritsén therefore resolved that the Reston project should not be abandoned after so much momentum had been generated. On his own initiative, he called James Barker, reported on the progress that had been made, and asked if Gulf Reston would cover losses, up to a maximum of $150, that might be incurred in the proposed two-week experiment. Barker very quickly obtained the necessary backing from Glenn W. Saunders, Jr., executive vice president of Gulf Reston.