

CARS v. TRANSIT

By William Nicoson

I have a friend, known as a brilliant economist, who insists that more and more cars will define our future. He's sure that most people prefer their own private space and control of their own vehicle rather than sharing public space as a passive rider. I'm sure many people share his view – particularly those who've never set foot in a bus or subway car.

But my own experience commuting from Reston to downtown DC has challenged this conventional wisdom.

Half a block from my house, I catch the 554 Fairfax Connector Bus at 8:40 (always precisely on time) headed for the West Falls Church Metro Station. On a recent trip, I kept books and papers in my brief case, concentrating on the passing urban scenery. The growth in the Dulles Corridor has been explosive and fascinating to observe.

As we sped out of Reston, I noted that an accident had blocked the exit ramp from the toll road to Hunter Mill Road, backing up traffic on the toll road itself. Police from two flashing cars were trying to sort out the jam. Without knowing how successful they were, I was quite happy to be moving swiftly away on the inner airport access lanes used by buses.

Next came a magnificent median sweep of yellow and red wild flowers, vivid enough to stir the soul. (Yes, wild flowers get to me.) I've applauded Reston Association for sowing wild flowers on embankments. Someone in the Airports Authority has had the similar good sense to offer transit riders the joy of nature's brilliant hues.

At 8:58, one minute early, we arrived at West Falls Church. Inside the station, I noted my Fare Card was low. At a Fare Card machine I inserted it and a five dollar bill, and a new card instantly jumped out in the amount of the old card plus five dollars. I used the new card to pass the turnstile and headed downstairs to the clearly marked Orange Line platform for trains serving downtown. A neon sign announced the next train's time of arrival (4 minutes) and the number of its cars (6).

The train arrived promptly at 9:05, with plenty of seats available. And seats on Metro trains are cushioned and comfortable. It was pleasant to speed through the Route I-66 median, observing how slowly the mass of cars headed the same way were moving as we passed. At East Falls Church, all cars had come to a standstill.

Nearing Ballston, we entered the tunnel at 9:08. Now it was time for reading. I quickly checked the agenda for my first meeting, then turned to The Washington Post. Another corporate scandal was breaking. Maybe I should write a column about corporate scandals. I started taking notes.

At 9:24 I left the train at Foggy Bottom, a five-minute walk through Washington Circle to my office. As I stood watching the heavy traffic in the circle, I reflected on the pleasure of walking, sitting and reading my way to work -- and letting professionals do their work -- all for about half the cost of parking a car downtown and with none of the stress of stop-and-start driving.

I admit that, keeping lawyers' hours, I ride transit somewhat past peak ridership. But the comparison between swift transit and bumper-to-bumper congestion at exactly the same time is nevertheless valid, and it is devastating for those stubbornly dedicated to commuting only by auto.

But my friend and all those like him won't get it if they don't try it.

William Nicoson has been riding transit for more than 40 years.