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Not just commuters

Giving VRE doubters the business

Date published: 12/7/2008



A PLANNED POLL of Greater Fredericksburg businesses regarding the Virginia Railway Express will, it's safe to predict, find that most support VRE, and that its backers include the 400 Spotsylvania County firms belonging to the Fredericksburg Area Chamber of Commerce.

The owners and employees of many Spotsylvania businesses surely use the commuter rail service on occasion to conduct commerce in Washington or elsewhere on the Fredericksburg Line.

What's more, many other Spotsylvania residents use VRE now and again, sometimes with kids in tow, on day trips to see the D.C. sights.

The arguments for Spotsylvania to climb aboard the train are well-known. The 2 percent surtax would yield extra money to help maintain and build county roads at a time when state DOT coffers are bare.

Maybe a strong showing of support for VRE by Spotsylvania businesses will move one or more hesitant supervisors to vote to join the rail service.

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The Daily Grind

America's Worst Small Towns For Commuters

Jon Bruner, 12.09.08, 12:01 AM EST

Those in the country's little spots don't necessarily have easy trips to work.



In Pictures: America's Worst Small Towns For Commuters

New York City's subway system irks travelers on a daily basis. But it's likely less frustrating than the roads those in Linton Hall, Va., take to work.

The 21,118-person town is 35 miles from Washington, D.C., and the 78% of residents who drive alone each day take an average of 46.3 minutes to get to work. That's

seven minutes longer than New Yorkers and 17 minutes longer than Angelenos.

In fact, the Washington, D.C., area is by far the worst part of the country for small-city commutes. Of the 100 small towns with the longest commutes, 18 are in Maryland and 10 are in Virginia—all of which are in the suburban sprawl radiating from Washington and Baltimore.

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Illinois comes in second, with 16 suburbs of Chicago making the 100 worst cities list.

Brentwood, Calif., Fort Washington, Md., Los Banos, Calif., and Clinton, Md., round out the top five.

Behind the Numbers

We compiled our list using data released Tuesday by the U.S. Census Bureau. It ranks cities, towns and Census-designated places by the average amount of time it takes for residents to get to work. The data, of places with populations between 20,000 and 64,999, come from the U.S. Census Bureau's three-year American Community Survey, which, between 2005 and 2007, asked respondents across the country how long it took them to get to work in the previous week.

The results show that many of the worst commutes begin in towns on the fringes big cities. Take Linton Hall, Va. With areas closer to D.C. growing more crowded and expensive, boom-time buyers looking for affordable new construction found themselves in this little town.

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"The developers out here did a really good job of selling a lifestyle," says Linton Hall Realtors owner and broker Ashley Leigh. Linton Hall is especially popular with military contractors, he says, many of whom brave the 35-mile drive to the Pentagon in Arlington, Va., in order to live in new, spacious houses at low prices.

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Linton Hall's commutes fall in line with the typical fringe-development pattern, says Robert Dunphy, senior resident fellow for transportation and infrastructure at the [Urban Land Institute](#). Developers build housing on the outskirts of metropolitan areas, and residents take on long commutes to distant jobs. Employers gradually move outward and commutes shorten, but those new jobs draw housing development into even more distant areas.

In Depth: Worst Small Towns For Commuters

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In Depth: Best Small Towns For Commuters

The longest commutes tend to be car-centric: More than three-quarters of Linton Hall's workers drive to work alone, for instance, and only 4% take public transportation. The exception to that rule is Bainbridge Island,

Wash., served by ferry from Seattle. Commutes there average 42 minutes, but 29% of commuters take public transportation to work.

Many cities with short commutes are also among the most walkable. In State College, Pa., where the average commute takes 13 minutes, 45% of workers reported walking to their jobs. More than 30% of commuters walk to work in the college towns of Athens, Ohio, and Oxford, Ohio, where commutes all average less than 15 minutes.

Aberdeen, S.D., had the shortest commutes on average--just 10.4 minutes. Two forts are also among the places with the easiest commutes: Fort Bragg in [North Carolina](#) and Fort Hood in Texas. There, like in those college towns with short commutes, residents live very close to work.

That type of arrangement is likely to remain rare in many of the nation's exurbs. Though the recession might seem to help commutes--traffic congestion typically eases during downturns--new jobs aren't appearing in fringe towns, so residents will need to stick with the far-away jobs they have.

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This has been the case with Linton Hall. Since the economy has cooled and the development cycle slowed, home prices in the town has declined roughly 40%, compared with 25% to 30% drops in suburbs closer to Washington.

"The jobs just haven't materialized out here," says Leigh. Still, he points to new **Lockheed Martin** (nyse: LMT - news -

people) and FBI offices nearby and hopes that more employers will move toward the western suburbs.

To counteract this situation, Dunphy says that rapidly growing areas need to take a regional approach to limiting fringe development.

"People are taking on long commutes in part because of what's being provided," he says, noting that compact, walkable housing is underprovided.

Better planning will also need to involve limits on how far out of the city employment centers can move, he says, in order to slow the cycle of jobs moving outward and pushing housing development even further. Barack Obama has promised to create an Office of Urban Policy, which could help direct regions and states to formulate healthy development policies.

But until these regions find some direction for their development, the cycle will likely continue--with attendant long commutes.

As Dunphy says, "The easiest development is always on the edge."

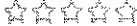

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Chamber members want Spotsylvania to join VRE CHAMBER SURVEY RESULTS

December 17, 2008 12:36 am

By DAN TELVOCK

Only 208 of Fredericksburg Regional Chamber of Commerce's 1,100 members participated in its survey gauging support for Spotsylvania County joining Virginia Railway Express.

An overwhelming majority of the respondents want the Spotsylvania Board of Supervisors to approve joining the commuter rail service. But most of the Chamber members who voted do not live or work in the county.

Chamber Executive Director Bob Hagan said the results may not be a deciding factor when the Board of Supervisors votes early next year, but regionwide opinion should have some influence.

"We do think if our jurisdictions are going to play well together, it is important to know what other parts of our region think about actions that are about to be taken," he said.

A majority of Spotsylvania voters supported a 2005 bond referendum that included \$12 million for a VRE station, but there are no plans to build one. That bond referendum also included millions of dollars for road-improvement projects.

Despite the bond vote, a majority of Spotsylvania supervisors has been unwilling to join VRE. Some of the reasons given are the 2 percent gasoline tax, unreliable train service, subsidizing a service that about 1,000 county residents use, and terms in the contract that don't make it easy to cancel VRE membership.

Portions of the 2 percent gas tax would go to VRE operations, but the remainder can be used for transportation projects in the county. County staff has estimated that several million dollars would be left over after the county pays its share of VRE operations.

Hagan, who is a VRE supporter and a former Spotsylvania supervisor, said he is happy with the number of respondents, but felt the Chamber could have gotten more participation if the survey deadline was extended beyond a week.

"We wanted to go into the new year with some idea of how our membership felt about this," he said.

The Chamber represents businesses in Fredericksburg and the counties of Spotsylvania, King George, Caroline and Stafford. Fredericksburg and Stafford are VRE members.

At least four Spotsylvania supervisors would need to support joining VRE; only three have publicly stated they do.

Supervisors Emmitt Marshall and T.C. Waddy have said they will never support the rail service; Supervisors Gary

Jackson and Jerry Logan are undecided.

"Any information related to VRE and what the public opinion is, is of interest to me," Logan said. "I am more interested in what Spotsylvania residents think about it."

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YES: 81.3 percent, or 169 people

NO: 7.2 percent or 15 people DON'T KNOW: 11.5 percent or 24 people

Of the 208 respondents: LIVE IN SPOTSYLVANIA: 96 WORK IN SPOTSYLVANIA: 79 LIVE AND WORK IN SPOTSYLVANIA: 57

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