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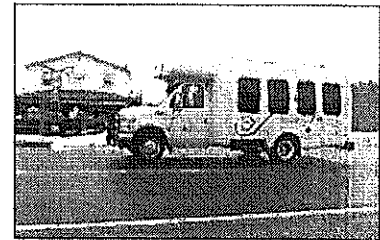
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## FRED transit: A valuable asset for the region

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SEVERAL RECENT developments--the proposal to the City Council by the Public Transit Advisory Board to double FREDericksburg Regional Transit's basic fare, Stafford County's freezing of the FRED budget for the second straight year, and King George County's steep cut in FRED's budget--prompt me to reflect on FRED's past, its progress, and its future role in the region.

FRED has come a long way since its launch in late 1996. Housed in a dilapidated former gas station, FRED started operations in the city on four routes with five buses. In its first full year of operations, FRED carried nearly 98,000 passengers. FRED now operates 30 buses on 21 routes in the city and in Spotsylvania, Stafford, Caroline, and King George counties, and in 2008 carried 513,000 passengers. FRED is a highly successful "big little system" among small urban and rural transit agencies.



A 'big little system,' FRED buses carried more than a half million passengers last year.

As impressive as FRED's progress has been, it still provides only the most basic service to the sprawling Fredericksburg region. The most frequent comments FRED gets from riders and residents are that it doesn't run close enough to where they live, work, or shop; it doesn't run frequently enough; and it doesn't run enough hours per day and days per week.

With an estimated population of about 307,000, one might surmise that the city and four surrounding counties could support more extensive transit service. But consider that those 307,000 are scattered over nearly 1,400 square miles of countryside, an area about the size of Rhode Island. The area's major employers and shopping centers are widely dispersed, as well. FRED's span of operations from its northernmost point in Stafford County to its southernmost point in Caroline County is 44 miles; from Dahlgren in the east to Spotsylvania Courthouse in the west is 42 miles.

With such a widely dispersed pattern of people, it is simply not cost effective for FRED to provide the type of high frequency, wide coverage, and extended hours of service that are available in larger and more densely populated areas. So, although five times larger than when it started, FRED service still doesn't reach 63 percent of the region's population, living on 83 percent of the region's land.

The short answer to why FRED doesn't provide a lot more service to a lot more places is that it would be prohibitively expensive and would not be cost effective.

For the upcoming fiscal year, FRED's projected operating expenses are about \$62 per hour. A typical 12-hour per day route costs nearly \$190,000 per year. Each FRED bus costs about \$115,000 and must be replaced every five or six years. Fortunately, FRED's local government partners don't have to pay the full amount of either operating or capital expenses. Grants from the federal and state governments offset roughly half of FRED's operating expenses and 80 percent of capital expenses.

FRED also actively seeks the support of local businesses and institutions through its Partners Program. For years, the University of Mary Washington and MediCorp have made generous contributions to FRED. More recently, the Star Radio Group and The Free Lance-Star have become major FRED partners. Over the years, other partners have included Geico, Petro, the Evergreens, English Oaks, and the Village of Idlewild.

Despite these fundraising efforts, the net expenses for FRED service that must be offset by local governments have grown. Unfortunately, these increases in expenses come at a time when local governments can least afford them, necessitating difficult decisions about spending priorities. These fiscal pressures have led to the proposed increase in fares and to the freezing or trimming of service.

In February, the PTAB recommended to City Council the first increase in the basic fare in FRED's history-- from 25 cents to 50 cents per boarding for basic fares and from \$1 to \$1.25 for VRE feeder service. The PTAB also recommended that fares cover 12 percent of FRED's operating expenses by FY2015. FRED estimates that the proposed increases would generate roughly \$100,000 in additional revenue and result in fares covering about 6 percent of expenses. While the proposed increases will be painful for some FRED riders, they are long overdue and will begin a measured process by which FRED riders will pay a larger share of the cost of service.

In response to budget pressures, two local government partners have opted to freeze or cut back FRED funding for the upcoming fiscal year. We at FRED understand the difficult and principled decisions Stafford and King George county supervisors have had to make about FRED funding and the funding of other programs. Service cutbacks in Stafford County will be modest; but in King George County they will be deeper, resulting in a service reduction of roughly 30 percent.

Despite current fiscal challenges, there is reason to be positive about the prospects for transit in the region. FRED has come a long way since its humble beginnings, and it has a long way to go before it will reach its full potential. The service FRED provides is a valuable asset for the region today and an essential component of "smart growth" in the future.

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