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FRED bus cuts service, new routes considered



Uriah A. Kiser/Stafford County Sun

Warren Wright, of Fredericksburg, boards a FRED bus at Aquia Town Center. The stop is one of the most used bus stops in North Stafford.

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By [URIAH A. KISER](#)

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STAFFORD — Despite steady increases in ridership, operators of the Fredericksburg Regional Transit bus system are telling Stafford residents to expect less service.

The transit agency is set to eliminate two of its most underperforming routes and consolidate two others, all in the northern portion of the county. All of the proposed changes by the transit system, which only provides weekday service to Stafford residents, would take effect August 11.

Routes D7 and D8, which provide rush-hour service from Aquia Harbour to commuter lots on both Mine Road and Staffordboro Boulevard, will be eliminated.

Routes D3 and D4, which provide service along Garrisonville Road, will be combined to form the new "Aquia Loop" service, running continuously from the Stafford Courthouse to shopping centers on U.S. 1 and Garrisonville Road.

The merged D3 and D4 routes will continue to serve all of the current stops along the line, except stops

in Aquia Harbour. All service to that neighborhood has been eliminated. Riders going to that area must call FRED 24 hours in advance and request a deviation to the regular bus route.

The D5 route, which currently runs from Fredericksburg to North Stafford, will now end at the Stafford Courthouse. No longer carrying passengers as far north as the former Aquia Towne Center, riders will have to transfer to the new "Aquia Loop" bus to reach their destination.

The D5 route is the most used bus line of the nine routes in Stafford County, carrying more than 3,000 passengers a month, according to the June rider ship statistics released by FRED. That route will also see its operating hours increased to 7 a.m. - 7 p.m.

The service cuts would amount to a three percent reduction of service in Stafford as a whole. Along with state and federal sources of funding, FRED relies on subsidies from the county government to operate the service.

In a cost-cutting effort, the Stafford County Board of Supervisors decided to freeze the agency's funding at \$477,655, the same amount the county provided for the 2008 fiscal year, according to Arnold Levine, FRED's manager of policy and planning.

The agency began its 2009 fiscal year on July 1. With no increase in funding and the rising cost of diesel fuel, the agency says the service cuts will help bring operating costs within the budget outlined by the county.

"We are losing money at the level of service we provide now," said Levine.

The budget freeze forced the agency to go back to the drawing board and devise new ways to meet the needs of area riders. The elimination and consolidation plans were their best options, according to the agency.

Plans to add new bus lines, like a service to Quantico Marine Corps base, were scrapped. That service could have possibly connected with OmniLink busses in neighboring Prince William County, providing better access to points north, said Kathleen Beck, FRED's general manager, in an earlier interview.

Elsie Garnett lives in North Stafford and rides FRED daily. Because of growing traffic on area roads, she said the bus is the only way she gets around. It costs her about \$12 per month to use the bus.

"It's a blessing to have this service here, the drivers are nice and I have met so many new faces while riding," said Garnett.

In the era of \$4 per gallon of gasoline, FRED riders are arriving at their destinations for significantly cheaper than they would if they drove themselves.

A one-way fare on FRED costs just 25 cents. If riders need to transfer to another bus, they pay another quarter. Children under three, employees of Mary Washington Hospital and students at the University of Mary Washington, in Fredericksburg, all ride for free.

Garnett boards the bus at the Aquia Towne Center, one of the most heavily used stops in North Stafford. Though the shopping center is now essentially a construction site making way for new office complexes and retail businesses, riders there say the number of people who use the stop will only continue to grow

once the center's renovation is completed next year.

Fredericksburg resident Warren Wright, who also uses the town center stop, has been riding the bus for nearly six months, and said he has saved a considerable amount of money doing so.

"I can take a cab from Fredericksburg up here for \$35, or I can take the bus for a quarter," said Wright. "If you do the math the bus helps a lot of people out."

Where some see the low fares as a great selling point bus of the service, others see it as a deterrent to the system's future in the county.

Stafford Supervisor Mark Dudenhefer, R-Garrisonville, said the service is too valuable to only charge a quarter per ride.

"Anything that you give away for free, which is essentially what we are doing by only charging 25 cents, people don't put a value on," said Dudenhefer.

The supervisor said he would like to see the one-way fare raised to 50 cents per passenger, though he said that still would not put a dent in the actual cost - per person - that the county pays in subsidies.

Because of Garrisonville's suburban layout, Dudenhefer said people in his district would rather drive their car to a commuter lot than wait for a bus to pick them up.

"I only know of one person in my district who uses the bus on a regular basis, and they use it to get to the commuter lot," said Dudenhefer.

Dudenhefer said FRED's current city-like operation strategy, with stops along roadways and streets to pick up and discharge passengers, doesn't work.

"Taking an urban model like FRED's and forcing it onto a suburban area is like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole," said Dudenhefer.

The service cuts come at a time when ridership in North Stafford is up nearly 19 percent, with FRED's June numbers showing an increase of more than 1,000 riders over the same time last year.

Overall, the entire FRED bus system reported a 45 percent increase in passenger trips, with busses carrying 13,400 more passengers than they did in June of 2007.

The two Stafford routes that will be eliminated, D7 and D8, saw a combined average rider ship just 497 passengers during the month of June, making them the least used routes in the entire system.

Many, including Dudenhefer, say FRED should be helping to transport more commuters to their jobs outside of the county. They say one way to do that is to get more people to Virginia Railway Express stations.

The idea has caught on in Spotsylvania County, where commuters who use the Gordon and Salem Road Commuter lots on Route 3, pay \$1 to ride an express FRED bus to the Fredericksburg VRE station.

"FRED is in the business of carrying people to work, though we don't do long haul commuter busses," said Levine.

The VRE express service has been very successful to date according to Levine, taking more than 80 cars off of a heavily congested Route 3 every day.

The agency also offers an express VRE bus in the City of Fredericksburg, but it has yet to attract the riders needed to maintain its level of service. Levine said the agency plans to modify that service over the next year.

Stafford Supervisor Paul Milde, R-Aquia, who also serves on VRE's operating board, said the parking lot at the Brooke Road station is well over capacity, forcing commuters to park their cars alongside Brooke Road and in other grassy areas.

Milde supports a FRED service that would ferry Stafford VRE passengers to the rail stations.

"Right now the bus is not geared to people in the mornings, and FRED should expand their focus here in the county and offer commuters better solutions," said Milde.

The transit agency admits that kind of service would do well in Stafford, and said if the county was willing to pay for it they could put it in place.

One drawback to providing express service to the Brooke Road VRE station is a low-lying railroad bridge that crosses Andrew Chapel Road, according to FRED.

"We don't want to get our busses down there and get stuck, or lose antennas," said Levine.

Stafford's Board of Supervisors approved the FRED service cuts during its July 1 public meeting.

Now the bus service must advertise the proposed changes to the routes, and is requesting feedback from area riders.

"We expect to hear from people who are losing their service, and we will do our best to accommodate them," said Levine.

FRED says it has put notices in area newspapers, on its Web site and has distributed fliers on the streets telling people about the changes.

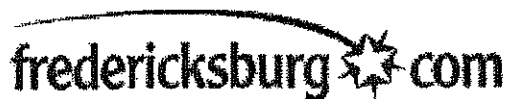
Levine said that no public meeting about the service changes would be scheduled.

At the end of the public comment period on Friday, Aug. 8, the transit agency will have only two days to evaluate the public's input before the changes take effect the following Monday.

Those two days happen to fall on a weekend.

FRED officials say, however, that should be enough time to review the comments before putting the service changes into effect.

Comments on the proposed changes can be mailed to Fredericksburg Regional Transit, 1400 Jefferson Davis Highway, Fredericksburg, Va. 22405. For more information on FRED service, fares and schedules, visit ridefred.com.



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Marvin Dixon leaves Fredericksburg council

August 8, 2008 12:15 am

BY EMILY BATTLE

Fredericksburg City Councilman Marvin Dixon said yesterday that he will resign his Ward I seat effective Sept. 1.

Dixon and his wife are tending to ailing relatives in California, and Dixon said he felt bad about missing meetings of the council and the various other boards he serves on because of that.

Dixon's term expires in 2010, so the six remaining council members will now have 30 days from Sept. 1 to appoint a new representative from Ward I.

The ward runs along the city's western border and includes most of the neighborhoods along Cowan Boulevard and State Route 3 west of U.S. 1, including the new Idlewild subdivision.

Dixon won his seat in 2006, about two years after he and his wife moved to Fredericksburg from California. The Dixons had visited the city many times on vacation, and were attracted to the area because of their love of history.

Councilman Matt Kelly said the fact that Dixon is fairly new to the area has given him a unique perspective on council.

"Most of us have been in this Fredericksburg fishbowl for years," Kelly said. "He kind of brought a fresh approach."

"He was a definite asset to the council, and he will be missed," said Mayor Tom Tomzak. "He had no personal agenda and was totally committed to the good of the city."

Other council members praised Dixon for the depth he brought to his arguments about council matters.

"Even in the times I didn't agree with him, I thought he brought a particularly thoughtful approach," Councilman George Solley said.

Dixon's council duties include service on about seven boards and commissions, including the Potomac and Rappahannock Transportation Commission, the Virginia Railway Express, the George Washington Regional Commission and the city's Housing Advisory Commission.

If the council can't agree on a replacement for Dixon by the end of September, the decision will shift to the Circuit Court. Tomzak said he doesn't think it will come to that.

He said anyone interested in the position should contact the clerk of council, Mary Smith, at 540/372-1010. He said the council might interview candidates if it gets several applications.

Dixon defeated two opponents--John E. Moss and Steve Braun--when he won his seat in 2006.

But in the most recent council elections, only three candidates ran for the two open at-large seats, and two candidates ran for the mayor's spot.

"Having just been through an election where there weren't tons of people jumping in," said Vice Mayor Kerry Devine, "it's a question of not just who do we want, but who's willing to serve?"

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