

ALTERNATIVE SERVICE PROVISION

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Transit In Montgomery County

Montgomery County's Ride On system is operated by the Division of Transit Services in the Department of Transportation, a major operating agency of the Montgomery County government. Montgomery County is a general purpose local government in the State of Maryland.

The central thrust of the Division of Transit Services is mobility in general, not a particular brand of service. As such, mobility in Montgomery County is characterized as an interrelated combination of services — Metrorail, Metrobus, commuter rail, Ride On, private shuttles, ridesharing, and the taxi industry.

Transit in Montgomery County is very extensive. It has been determined that about 80 percent of county population lives — and 95 percent of county employment opportunities are located — within one-half mile of a bus stop or rail station. Ride On connects neighborhoods to Metrorail and other transit centers. At these locations, passengers can access the radially oriented rail system and other buses for the purpose of suburb-to-suburb and intra-county trips.

Ride On's Origins

Ride On is essentially an experiment that has turned into a \$34 million annual commitment. Ride On started in April 1975. At that time, the regional transit operator, WMATA, had been established and had taken over the private services that had operated in the region. The County determined that certain transit needs existed that needed to be addressed over and above the regional service. The County decided to take charge of its own destiny to fill the identified gaps in service.

A Clear Service Concept

Ride On serves both downtown and suburb-to-suburb trips in the region. The service was designed to provide feeder service to the radially-oriented Metrorail system operated by WMATA. As such, Ride On connects neighborhoods to the rail stations as a primary objective. However, the Ride On System and the bus

service in the County exploits the formidable transit centers provided by the Metrorail system, which serve as focal points for the service.

The Ride On service provides the shorter transit trips, operates on less major streets, serves somewhat lower ridership routes, and operates in the less densely populated areas of the County than WMATA's Metrobus.

Ride On's Service

The Ride On system operates from 5:00 a.m. to 1:00 a.m. seven days per week. However, the number of routes operating at any given time varies by time of day and day of week. Peak Ride On service includes 68 routes served with a fleet of 208 county owned and operated buses and 30 contractor owned and operated buses. Ride On provides about 430,000 annual vehicle hours of revenue service and about 7.2 million vehicle miles of revenue service.

Montgomery County has established a policy that the maximum headway in the Ride On system will be 30 minutes. The tightest headway in the system is five minutes.

Montgomery County owns and operates 230 mid-city transit coaches of either 30 or 35 feet in length. The County's contractor owns and operates forty 20-passenger, body on chassis buses. Metrobus owns and operates 180 full size transit coaches, including 12 articulated buses. In addition to rolling stock used in Montgomery County, the County's Ride On system has two operations centers that house both operations and maintenance elements, one in the lower county and one in the upper county.

Other capital elements of the transit system in Montgomery County include 5000 bus stops, 230 shelters and 14 park and ride lots in two major transportation corridors in the County with a total capacity of 3,400 vehicles. Transit centers are located at each of the County's 13 Metrorail stations, and at Montgomery Mall and Lakeforest Mall.

Responding To New Challenges

Over the last four years our transit planning has been tested as revenues have flattened. In order to simply maintain the same level of transit service, many unique moves have been made. In addition to continuing reliance on contracting, we began to look almost

annually to routes or portions of routes that could be shifted to other operators.

Until the fiscal situation became difficult, we had considered shifting whole Ride On routes from a directly operated mode to our small bus contractor or whole Metrobus routes to Ride On operation. When revenues dried up, we began to look within routes by time of day to determine if a smaller vehicle could handle weekend service, midday service, or late evening service.

The shifting of service started within the Ride On system, where problems, such as vehicle identification and fare structure, were not so complex. However, we were ultimately forced to shift portions of Metrobus routes to Ride On.

The primary thrust has been to identify instances in which a smaller bus could be substituted on a one-for-one basis based on the average ridership. However, there are a few unique exceptions. We have looked carefully at the on/off character of routes to identify instances in which a smaller bus could be used in spite of fairly heavy ridership. The best example of this is a major collector/distributor route along a major arterial in Montgomery County. In spite of very heavy ridership on this line, the loads are not so high as to require a 40-foot bus. Therefore, we were able to shift this major Metrobus route to Ride On. Another change we made in the route was to truncate it at a natural break point along the route. While this became a minor inconvenience for a few passengers who relied on the route for a long distance trip, it allowed us to operate the route very reliably since each of the two segments was significantly shorter. Therefore, in the aggregate cost savings and reliability have offset the inconvenience.

Ride On's Riders

From our triennial on-board survey, we have a good idea who our current riders are. We know that the typical Ride On rider is much more likely to be female (59.5 percent) than male (40.5 percent). We also know that our typical rider is somewhat more likely to be African American (38.0 percent) than Caucasian (32.9 percent). We also have a large number of Hispanic/Latino riders (18.3 percent). Finally, five percent of our riders are Native American and 5.7 percent are Asian.

Over 60 percent of our riders are under the age of 35. Of these, 8.8 percent are under the age of 18, and 27.1 percent are between 18 and 24 years of age. At the other end of the age range, 10.2 percent of our riders are 55 or over. That leaves 17.6 percent of our riders in the 35-to-44 age cohort and 8.5 percent between the ages of 45 and 54.

When Ride On service began, there were 900 passengers per day in Silver Spring and 300 passengers per day in the upper county service. Currently, Ride On's weekday passenger trips stand at 58,400. Total transit ridership (Metrorail, Metrobus and Ride On) in the area is 239,000 per weekday. Metrorail carries 127,000 passenger trips daily and Metrobus serves about 54,000.

Measuring Performance

Montgomery County uses a set of productivity standards as a guide to determine the appropriate operator and to make service enhancement or curtailment decisions. For peak-period service, the County standard is an average of 15 passengers per hour; for service outside the peak, we use 10 passengers per hour as the guideline. Finally, we use a standard of 12 passengers per platform hour for the service operated by our contractor using smaller vehicles. Overall, Ride On passengers per platform hour was 29 in 1994. This was up from 27 passengers per platform hour in 1989.

Another rough productivity indicator is the cost per rider. We track Mass Transit Facilities Fund expenditures against ridership to calculate a more traditional productivity indicator. Cost per rider in 1989 dollars has fallen \$.05, or four percent over the last four years, from \$1.26 per rider to \$1.21.

There are a number of other ways that we measure performance in Montgomery County. They include monthly schedule adherence reviews, weekly tracking of complaints and compliments regarding each operator, other customer feedback mechanisms, and on-board surveys.

The Service Development and Promotion Section of the Division recently developed and implemented a new and very effective innovation in service monitoring. We established a Service Monitoring Group that meets weekly for about one-half hour. The group reviews the complaints and service interruptions of the last week with key managers at headquarters,

transit information personnel, representatives of central dispatch, and operations personnel.

Prior to the weekly meeting, data are summarized and preliminary investigations are accomplished if particularly hot items or troublesome trends have emerged. Since it was established last fall, the group has also spearheaded the development of a paperless complaint resolution process connecting all four key locations of the division. The group first undertook the task of making the complaint categories more meaningful and reducing their number. Then the group guided the development of the new system that allows instant communication and follow up of complaints that formerly were resolved in an average of two weeks.

Ride On's Fiscal Situation

The Mass Transit Facilities Fund (MTFF) includes expenditures for all transit for which the County had obligations. Total MTFF expenditures by the County in 1994 were estimated at \$99.2 million. The MTFF includes the County's obligations to WMATA for Metrorail and Metrobus operating subsidies. The fund also includes expenditures for debt service associated with both county and WMATA capital improvements.

The MTFF revenues include state aid, mass transit tax revenue, fare revenue, federal aid, and several other miscellaneous sources. Total MTFF revenues for 1994 were estimated to be \$107.1 million, including unappropriated surplus.

Total expenditures for the Division of Transit Services in 1994 were \$44.7 million. This amount included expenditures for bus replacement, ridesharing, taxi regulation, and some other expenditures in addition to Ride On costs. Of the \$44.7 million, costs attributable to Ride On operations were \$34.0 million in 1994.

Ride On is funded through state aid at \$9.7 million, fare revenue at \$8.5 million and the Mass Transit Tax at \$15.8 million. Ride On uses a 30 percent cost recovery against direct costs criterion as a guide. In fiscal year 1994 Ride On cost recovery stood at 27 percent. The mass transit tax rate in Montgomery County is applied essentially to the same tax base as the general property tax.

Recent Legislative Factors

The legislative issue that is most interesting at present provides state funding for transit in Maryland. The State has long funded a large portion of the WMATA operating deficit attributable to Montgomery County Metro service. Beginning in 1976, the State provided funding for local bus services only for certain bus services that Montgomery County took over from the regional operator.

In 1984, the County was planning a major bus service expansion in connection with the opening of the Shady Grove end of the Metro Red Line, and legislation was passed to provide for funding of new service to the extent that the secretary of transportation approved. The State recognized that the total cost of the service would be much higher if the service was to be provided by the regional provider. As a result the State was motivated to hold down expenditures.

In 1992, state legislation was amended to provide additional funding for Metrorail, Metrobus, and Ride On. Now the County receives support for 100 percent of the eligible service subject to the Secretary's approval. However, with the additional support has come a much higher degree of state interest in the level of funding, if not service, in Montgomery County.

The Unions And Ride On

Local union problems have not been terribly difficult in the recent past. The County bus operators are represented by one union. The employees in two contracts are represented by two other unions. The contractor has had no large union problems.

However, as the County gets more and more creative out of necessity to identify the most efficient operator and the most appropriate vehicle size, the labor relations landscape is changing. The union representing the regional operator has become increasingly active as we have taken over more and more service, indicating that such an approach throughout the region would doom the regional transit operator.

Ride On And Contracting

Initially, Ride On was a directly operated system. Then, in the mid-1980s, the County was attempting to limit the growth in the County work force. In response, contracting for government services gathered

momentum. A study was done of the feasibility of contracting for transit services and it was determined that the best opportunity for contracting was on the lower ridership routes on which smaller vehicles could be used.

From annual contract expenditures of \$1.1 million in 1987, the annual expenditures for contract bus service have grown to \$4.1 million in fiscal year 1994. Contracting has played a central role in connection with our recent innovations in the delivery of transit services in the County. In a way, the increase in the use of contracting is a return to the earlier days of Ride On when smaller vehicles were needed to address transit needs and hold down costs.

Community Support And Involvement

Ride On enjoys extraordinary political support, especially considering that the taxpayers provide through the Mass Transit Tax almost half of the funding for Ride On. The political support has always been there since the early days when the County went out on its own to make a significant commitment to local bus systems.

Montgomery County employs many means through which the community can become involved. Since the transit division is part of the general purpose local government, the transit budget and transit policy gets a fair amount of scrutiny from within the county government through the budget process. The executive branch scrutiny is in the form of reviews by the director of transportation, the office of management and budget, and the county executive. The transit budget is published within the executive's recommended budget, which is transmitted to the county council.

In addition to the community involvement in the formal budget process, the County often holds public forums. The issues are typically service changes and changes in the fare structure. Perhaps the frequency is higher than would be required under federal regulations.

The County also has other formal mechanisms for the community to become involved. Several committees have been established to advise the director of transportation on transit and related issues. One key committee is the Keep Montgomery County Moving Committee (KMCM) that meets about eight times per year. The KMCM Committee is comprised of

members of the business community, the education community, the government sector, and other interested parties. The committee brings diverse views to the field of transit and transportation.

Another important advisory body was created when the Silver Spring Transportation Systems Management District was formed. Montgomery County Code requires that the advisory committee advise the director of transportation on issues related to transportation systems management in Silver Spring, including progress toward modal split goals, parking policy, transit policy, transportation improvements, and other related issues.

There also exists a private advisory group called the Transportation Action Partnership, Inc. (TAP) in the North Bethesda area. This public/private partnership was undertaken to guide the direction of transportation, transit, and development in the North Bethesda area. Under recently passed legislation concerning development in Metro station policy areas the TAP may become a more formal actor in transportation in the North Bethesda area.

Lessons Taught and Lessons Learned

If anything has been learned from the County's experience with Ride On over the last twenty years, it is that flexibility is essential. Ride On is an ever evolving service. And we see even more significant changes on the horizon. Many surprises and problems have been encountered. Perhaps more importantly, they have been overcome.

It is this inherent flexibility and resiliency that has served the community well and keeps the community happy. Any similarly situated community and many others could replicate the success Ride On has experienced. All it takes is the same sort of commitment to transit that Montgomery County has made.