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HOT OR COLD, VANPOOLERS CHERISH THEIR METHOD OF TRANSPORTATION SURE RIDE HOME

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By KELLY HANNON

Roger Berry has never had to break up a vanpool fight.

But he does hear a lot about the heating and air conditioning.

"Once you get past one person and you've got two or three people, nobody's going to be happy," said Berry, 58, a veteran vanpool driver from Stafford. "This person is hot. This person is cold. So you get a lot of that. Turn the heat up. Turn the heat off. Turn the air on."

The tradeoff for a little discomfort is a direct, shorter commute--and often a less-expensive one.

Still, to vanpool, "You have to be somebody willing to make sacrifices. There are 10 of us," Berry said.

But there's a certain closeness that develops among commuters who spend two hours of every workday sitting together in a van.

Not always friendship, but something approaching camaraderie.

"People spend as much time with each other as they do with their families," said Rick Hood, owner of ABS Vans, a vanpool company based in Stafford.

There is no official number of vanpoolers in the Fredericksburg area, but the George Washington Regional Commission reports there are 397 registered vanpools based in the region.

Averaging 12 passengers per van, there are nearly 4,800 vanpoolers in the city of Fredericksburg and Caroline, King George, Stafford and Spotsylvania counties.

Commuters who choose vanpooling are passionate about their choice.

Berry has taken vans to Capitol Hill for more than 30 years. His van leaves from the U.S. 17 commuter lot in Falmouth. He drives the van in the evenings.

"It's a convenience thing for me. The vanpool brings me right to my door. The train doesn't do that," said

Berry, who works for the Architect of the Capitol at the Library of Congress.

Vanpool driver Shawn Walkey of Stafford used to ride Virginia Railway Express, but the commute required driving to the train station, riding VRE and taking Metro.

"All in all, that was taking an hour and a half," Walkey said.

Now his trip from the Mine Road commuter lot in North Stafford to the Department of Veterans Affairs takes 45 minutes in the morning and 45 minutes on the way home--except on Thursday and Friday afternoons, when traffic is worse.

Vanpool fares vary depending on the number of riders in a van, the destination, the cost of parking, and whether a vanpool member is willing to drive.

Walkey said his commuting costs dropped about \$100 a month.

To prevent culture clash when a person starts vanpooling, ABS Vans distributes a list of do's and don'ts. The rules include no eating, drinking or smoking in the van.

Mornings are usually quiet in a van. But in the afternoon, some vanpoolers talk.

Whenever 10 to 15 adults have a discussion, there can be differences. Over the years, Hood has had to intervene in a few conflicts between riders who get into heated arguments.

Hood says there's an easy way to avoid that problem.

"I'd say if you don't like the conversation, then don't get in the conversation," Hood said.

Most of Berry's riders nap on the way in, and he can't recall any arguments.

Walkey said things remain positive in his van, too.

"In the morning people sleep, and in the evenings it's a mix. Some days people are sleeping, other days we have a good time," he said.

Punctuality is important in a vanpool, both men said.

"We leave at 5:30 and if you're there, you're there. If you're not there, we leave," Berry said.

Walkey agreed: "The van will leave without you," he said.

That may sound harsh to the uninitiated. But commuters tired from a day's work--or anxious to arrive on time for a meeting--rely on their fellow passengers to be timely, Berry said.

Walkey's family enjoys the predictability of a vanpool. He said his wife now knows exactly what time he'll walk through the door.

Vanpooling can become a routine that lasts a career.

Berry drove a woman who had been a vanpool passenger for 20 years.

"When she left, I'd been riding with her longer than I'd been riding with anybody," Berry said.

"Some people you do kind of develop a friendship with When she left, it was kind of weird," he said.

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Commuter Connections' Guaranteed Ride Home program eliminates fear about missing the van or other transit commuting options.

Up to four times a year, registered commuters can get a free ride home if there is an emergency or they have to work unscheduled overtime.

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