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Space abundant in some commuter lots

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BY SCOTT SHENK

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It seems like a perfectly good commuter parking lot. There are 1,050 spaces on the level, well-maintained pavement. It sits beside a major artery, U.S. 17, near plenty of restaurants and shopping and less than a half mile from Interstate 95.

And there are plenty of empty spaces. For free, too.

On Tuesday just before noon, there were close to 400 spots for the taking. Nearly half of the lot's back section was empty.

Meanwhile, about eight miles north in Garrisonville, state troopers this week were putting warning fliers on illegally parked cars in the Staffordboro Boulevard and Mine Road commuter lots, both of which are jammed beyond capacity on weekdays, with cars settled in no-parking zones and fire lanes, in the grass and mud and in general anywhere a car will fit. And some places where they don't fit.

Troopers have handed out an average of 75 warnings a day, said 1st Sgt. Keith Hairston. He said illegal parking is still bad at the two lots, though some commuters seem to be trying.

"It wasn't as bad as it normally is," he said Thursday.

Still, the plethora of illegally parked cars creates potential hazards, he said. Starting Monday, the troopers will start ticketing scofflaws at the lots. The ticket is not cheap--\$81, including court costs.

Parking at the two Garrisonville lots has been a constant problem in recent years, and especially this year, with illegally parked cars causing problems for buses that use the lot to get to and from Anne E. Moncure Elementary School.

The problems caught the attention of Gov. Bob McDonnell, who included \$5.5 million in his transportation plan to expand the Staffordboro lot by 1,000 spaces. The transportation plan also includes funding for a combined 2,000 parking spaces in Spotsylvania County at the lot on Gordon Road and State Route 3 and at the planned Virginia Railway Express station on the U.S. 17 Bypass.



A compilation of photos shows commuter lots that are at capacity while others south of North Stafford have plenty of space for parking.

Those solutions seem to ignore the issue of why the Garrisonville lots are packed to overflowing while there are empty spaces at the U.S. 17 lot, as well as at the lot on Courthouse Road in Stafford.

Slug lines, which are unique to this region, seem to be the culprit.

The Staffordboro and Mine Road lots are extremely popular among commuters who slug.

Many of those commuters live in the Garrisonville area, so the two lots off State Route 610 are the most convenient.

"Nobody drives south to catch a ride north," said Mark Dudenhefer, Stafford supervisor and longtime slug commuter.

Yet there are other commuters who bypass the U.S. 17 and Courthouse Road lots to use slug lines at Staffordboro and Mine Road.

Roger Savage has been slugging to his Pentagon job for five years, and he uses the Staffordboro lot.

"I live on [U.S.] 17 and I come here," he said one evening last week at the Staffordboro lot.

Savage and other commuters said the two Garrisonville lots are the most convenient because finding slug rides is predictable and faster than at the U.S. 17 lot. Courthouse Road no longer has slug lines.

Moving a slug line from the Garrisonville area to U.S. 17, or even Courthouse Road, apparently is not a simple thing to do.

Slug lines are unregulated and work on their own without guidelines.

"Slug lines basically assist themselves," said Diana Utz with GWRideconnect, an organization that helps area commuters find ride options.

She pointed out that the Garrisonville lots are in a "transit hub" that draws commuters in general, and slugs specifically, because of the location and options.

Commuters who slug can use either the Staffordboro or Mine Road lot, and there are private bus services they can use in case they miss out on a slug line.

"The 610 corridor is very popular, and the slug line [at Staffordboro] is the oldest slug line," she said.

Dudenhefer said convenience and timeliness are keys to the slug commuter.

"It's got to meet the needs of the people who use them," he said.

One bad experience can make a slug commuter give up on a spot for good.

"They tried a slug line at Courthouse Road and it didn't work," Dudenhefer said. And some have been scared off by the U.S. 17 congestion during rush hour, he added.

While the slug mentality is basically based on "self-fulfilling gratification," Dudenhefer said it's simply too complicated to figure out how slug lines work. "They certainly don't teach this in traffic school."

Slug lines are "self-managing and self-perpetuating," he said. "This is a complicated psychological issue" with "so many different personalities."

Commuting as a whole is a problem that may be impossible to fix, he said. "We're so far behind."

Utz pointed out that there was a time when the U.S. 17 lot also had parking problems.

"Years ago, the 17 lot was in the same shape as the 610 lot today," Utz said. The lot was expanded, but it "never filled up."

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COMMUTER PARKING SPACES

Staffordboro Boulevard: 850

Mine Road: 750

Courthouse Road: 550

U.S. 17: 1,050

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