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## Aquia parking lot is closing

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By KELLY HANNON

One of the few shopping centers in North Stafford that allowed ride-sharing commuters to park in its lot is ending the practice, effective this week.

The company managing the renamed "Town Center at Aquia" at the intersection of U.S. 1 and Garrisonville Road said it would be unsafe to allow commuter parking while construction is ongoing. Commuter parking will not be allowed after the work is done.

Ramco-Gershenson Properties Trust is converting the shopping center into a mixed-use development with offices, residential units, restaurants and retail stores.

"Please note that if you continue to park at this location, your vehicle will be towed at your expense," states a Ramco-Gershenson flier placed on commuter vehicles Friday.

The Michigan-based company allowed commuters to park at the shopping center just east of Interstate 95 as long as possible. It hoped to set aside commuter spaces throughout the reconstruction work at the center, said Ed Wizner, Ramco-Gershenson's vice president of development.

But after conferring with contractors last week, the company decided that was not possible.

"It's everything from safety reasons to liability," Wizner said.

Stray nails could cause flat tires, and what limited parking is available during the project needed to be saved for patrons of Rite Aid, Regal Cinemas, and tenants in a new office building.

About 100 commuters who met carpools and vanpools in the lot have been displaced. Formerly known as Aquia Towne Center, the shopping center had been a commuter parking location since it opened in the early 1990s.

"We truly appreciate everything [Ramco-Gershenson] have done," said Diana Utz, director of GWRideConnect, a free service that matches area residents with carpools, vanpools and buses.

Efforts are under way to find a replacement lot.



The Staffordboro lot is so full, some drivers resort to parking illegally.

The Fredericksburg Area Metropolitan Planning Organization has \$150,000 in federal money to lease parking spaces on Garrisonville Road near I-95, but no retailer has agreed to host commuters yet.

Vanpool owner Tom Chirhart of Stafford used to pick up seven people at the Town Center. Now, they've shifted their meeting place to the Courthouse Road commuter lot.

They would prefer to stay in North Stafford, close to where everyone lives. But the two Virginia Department of Transportation commuter lots off Garrisonville Road are full by 6:30 a.m.

"There's a lack of places to park," Chirhart said. "Commuter lots are filling up. You start to wonder, where can you turn?"

The Garrisonville Road lots are popular spots for instant carpools, where lines of commuters, or slugs, wait for rides with solo drivers who want to use the High Occupancy Vehicle lanes to destinations in Northern Virginia and D.C.

The only Stafford commuter lot with an abundance of space is on U.S. 17. On a good day, there may be empty spaces at the Courthouse Road lot.

Utz encourages displaced commuters to approach merchants individually to get permission to park in their lots during the day.

Some commuters have had success with this approach, Utz said.

The construction of the High Occupancy Toll lane project on Interstate 95/395 could generate \$250 million for transit along the I-95 corridor, including construction of commuter lots. Construction of the HOT lanes could begin in 2010 in Northern Virginia.

A committee is still deciding where the lots would go, but traffic studies show Stafford will need another 2,000 spaces by 2030.

Stafford Supervisor Paul Milde, who represents the Aquia district, said he's sorry to see commuter parking reduced now, and wishes the state would help Stafford find and finance extra parking.

"The slugs are the best thing the state and the county has going for them as far as mass transit," Milde said.

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