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POPULAR PARKING LOTS OVERFLOW

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By KELLY HANNON

The woman in the white trench coat jumps out of her SUV and starts to stride through the parking lot toward the slug line.

A dark sedan rolls up beside the car.

Virginia State Police 1st Sgt. Keith Hairston gently calls out the window: Excuse me, he says.

"Do you realize you're parking in an illegal zone?" Hairston asks the woman.

She stops.

"Yes," she says, somewhat defiantly.

Hairston asks her to move her car or risk paying a \$275 towing charge.

"Are you local?" she asks, apparently not seeing the state trooper's uniform patch.

"I'm state," Hairston replies evenly.

The woman doubles back and moves her car.

She was fortunate. When Hairston spotted her shortly after 7 a.m. on Thursday, there are still a dozen legal parking spaces in the farthest corner of the Staffordborough Boulevard commuter lot off Garrisonville Road in North Stafford.

It's a hike to the slug line, where commuters catch free rides to destinations in Northern Virginia and Washington. But at least this woman knows her car will still be there when she returns that night.

Another driver was not as lucky Thursday.



A shortage of parking spaces may be a reason for some of the illegal parking that takes place in commuter lots such as this one off State Route 610.



State police 1st Sgt. Keith Hairston checks traffic at a State Route 610 commuter lot one morning last week.



Dan Bryant of Bryant's Towing hooks up an illegally

The owner of a red Honda sedan had parked overnight in a no-parking zone in the lot, with the car sticking out into the travel lane. Charter buses had to veer into an oncoming traffic lane to get around it, since the Honda narrowed the turning radius. Any larger vehicles--15-passenger vans, FREDericksburg Regional Transit buses, emergency vehicles--would have the same trouble, Hairston said.

State police made the decision to tow the car.

To encourage legal parking, and to restore some calm, state troopers are stepping up their presence at the Staffordborough and Mine Road lots, which are the most popular in the Fredericksburg area.

There are open spaces at every other commuter lot in the Fredericksburg region, but commuters are drawn to the State Route 610 lots because of the robust slug line and proximity to Interstate 95, said Diana Utz, director of GWRideConnect in Fredericksburg.

"Commuters love those lots. They like that corridor, and they like to be close to that interchange," Utz said.

State police are called whenever there is trouble at the Staffordborough and Mine Road lots, often by other commuters. Lately, the calls have increased.

"We're not trying to interfere with slugging at all," said Hairston, whose wife commutes by slugging several days a week. "That's a proven system. It's been working and we're not trying to do anything to hinder that. All we're concerned about is the safety aspects in the parking lot, people passing on the double-sided lines, people cutting each other off."

ILLEGAL PARKING INCREASES

Commuter lots are maintained by the Virginia Department of Transportation, but state police investigate vandalism, fender benders and, increasingly, illegal parking that blocks travel lanes or other vehicles.

The Staffordborough and Mine Road lots have reached 110 percent of capacity, according to VDOT spokeswoman Tina Bundy.

With 750 spaces in the Mine Road lot and 850 in the Staffordborough lot, that translates to more than 160 illegally parked vehicles a day.

This Thursday, both lots were full by 7:30 a.m.

New arrivals parked anywhere they could--on grass, gravel shoulders, illegal zones at the end of a row of cars, and directly under "No Parking" signs. Deep tire ruts were carved in the mud near the tree line. Overflow parkers walk to the slug line after parking at neighboring hotels, office parks and shopping centers.

TROOPERS TAKING ACTION

State troopers issued a warning to every driver they saw parking improperly. Before police resort to

parked car in the State Route 610 commuter lot in Stafford. The car had been blocking the turning area.



Faded lines in the commuter lots off State Route 610 in Stafford make legal parking more difficult for motorists who use slugging to get to work.

towing, they want to educate commuters about what can happen if they park illegally, including the \$275 towing fee, and encourage drivers to be safe, Hairston said.

"I'm just worried someone's going to get hurt," he said.

A handful of commuters on Thursday stopped to thank the troopers, or called out cheers of encouragement as they drove past.

"Thank you," a man shouted from his pickup. "It's getting out of hand."

But other commuters shook their heads in anger or frustration when they were asked to move their cars from illegal zones, mumbling to themselves once they were out of earshot.

Everyone connected to the situation, from law enforcement to commuters to elected officials, agrees that more parking is the solution.

Creating the parking is harder to do.

MILDE BLAMES THE STATE

Stafford Supervisor Paul Milde says the state has abdicated responsibility by not paying for new lots in North Stafford.

He says state government has an interest in promoting slugging and ride sharing, which cuts down on congestion and pollution.

"We have to do everything we can as a government to encourage that behavior," Milde said.

Along with other county supervisors who represent parts of North Stafford, including Mark Dudenhefer, Cord Sterling and Bob Woodson, Milde has hunted for new spaces along Route 610 with little success.

Private retailers, including Stafford Marketplace across the street from the lots, have declined to lease spaces.

The George Washington Regional Commission in Fredericksburg, where Utz works, has had as much as \$150,000 in federal money to lease commuter parking in North Stafford.

NEW SPACES WEREN'T USED

Utz secured 35 spaces at the Quantico Corporate Center earlier this year, hoping some vanpools or carpools would relocate to U.S. 1 from Route 610, freeing up space.

Few people bit. The commission had to give the spaces up.

"We didn't have the interest we hoped to get in that area. It might have been too far off the 610 corridor, I don't know. They were great spaces," Utz said.

Hopes now lie with the planned high occupancy toll lanes project on I-95. If the public-private project between Virginia and Fluor-Transurban is finalized later this year, the two private companies will pay to build 3,000 new parking spaces along I-95.

Just over 1,000 of the new spaces would be built near Garrisonville Road, with 300 new spaces in the Massaponax area.

A committee of local transportation planners is meeting now to locate parking sites, which must be near I-95 and accessible to transit, Utz said. "We want it to be a large lot where the commuters can go to one space and get everything they need," she said.

But those spaces could be two years away, possibly longer. Until then, what should commuters do?

"Take it slow, be safe and be careful. There are spaces available in the [U.S.] 17 commuter lot and the Route 630 commuter lot today," Utz said. She hopes slug lines will flourish in those locations. Other lots with open spaces are on Courthouse Road, Gordon Road and Old Salem Church Road in Spotsylvania County.

REDRAWING THE LINES

VDOT will soon make it clearer which spaces are legal and which are illegal when it repaints the lines in the lots. The lines will be redrawn to add 40 spaces at Mine Road and 10 spaces at Staffordborough, Bundy said.

Local governments are still open to leasing spaces in case any retailers along Route 610 have changed their minds. "We'd be happy to talk to them," Utz said.

Milde asked for understanding from commuters as officials try to build new lots. "They're going to have to be patient with us while we try to correct this problem," Milde said.

Until then, the state police asks that everyone park in a legal spot. "Most people want to do the right thing," Hairston said.

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