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## Martz change raises concerns

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By KELLY HANNON

Mary Ann Emely, 61, has perfected her commute.

Emely boards the 6:50 a.m. Martz Virginia commuter bus at the Staffordborough Boulevard commuter lot.

She disembarks at 8 a.m. at the intersection of 15th and K streets in Washington.

In the evening, she rides buses home that depart between 5 and 7 p.m. Flexibility is important to her, since she is a supervisor at a nonprofit association.

The bus is direct. There is no transferring to Metro once she's in the city, and no long drives. "The bus was the most convenient solution because the commuter lot is closer to my home than the train station," Emely said.

Then Martz Virginia announced it was eliminating two morning bus runs, including Emely's preferred 6:50 a.m. one.

This week will be the last time Martz's DC 9 and DC 12 buses run in the morning. The buses made the later morning pick-ups, collecting passengers in North Stafford at 6:50 and 7:10, and slightly earlier at lots on Courthouse Road and State Route 3 in Spotsylvania County and U.S. 17 in Stafford.

The change stunned several dozen commuters who had built their lives around the later pickups.

"I'm a contractor for the government and I cannot be to work until 8 o'clock in the morning. My building does not open until then," said Vicki Dotson, 49, of Stafford, who works in the Foggy Bottom area of Washington. She drove by herself for 21 years until she switched employers and lost a parking space. She has been riding Martz for two years.

"I don't know what I'm going to do. Last resort is to take the earlier bus and stand outside my building for 40 minutes," she said



Commuters wait to board the bus at the Staffordborough Boulevard lot off State Route 610 in North Stafford.



A Martz commuter bus leaves the Staffordborough Boulevard commuter parking lot.

Earlier buses are more popular, and consequently more crowded, said Tony Bell, 47, of Stafford. "It's not enough space to hold all these people," Bell said, gesturing to people waiting in line for the DC 9 bus on a Tuesday morning.

Martz Virginia/National Coach Trailways regional general manager David Snyder could not be reached for comment. But a message to riders posted on the company Web site, [martzgroupva .com](http://martzgroupva.com), said the routes were dropped for economic and ridership reasons.

"We continue to find that many of the products we purchase (tires, parts, cleaning materials, etc.) continue to increase in price despite the downturn in the economy. Likewise, because of the economy, we are seeing changes in the ridership patterns for various commuter runs."

## NO LOCAL BUS SUBSIDIES

Local governments in the Fredericksburg area do not subsidize commuter buses to work destinations in Northern Virginia and Washington.

Fairfax, Prince William and Loudoun counties do provide subsidized commuter bus service to destinations beyond their borders, mostly to Metro stations, the Pentagon, Crystal City and downtown Washington. The buses are OmniRide in Prince William, the Fairfax Connector, and Loudoun County Commuter Buses.

Fredericksburg-area commuters are reliant on private bus companies, and have no public way to appeal when ticket prices are raised or schedules are changed.

In this instance, another company stepped in.

Quick's Bus Co. in Stafford will start a new route to help the passengers from the cancelled Martz buses. Service starts on Wednesday.

Quick's wants to expand commuter service in the Fredericksburg area, said Kim Quick, general manager. She's the granddaughter of the company's founder.

Quick's Route 11 will stop at the Old Salem Church Road commuter lot at 6:20 a.m., U.S. 17 at 6:35, State Route 630 at 6:50 and the Staffordborough lot near State Route 610 at 7.

Quick said she's willing to start running a second or third bus in the late morning if there is enough ridership.

"I'm trying to get the word out that we're willing to go wherever. I just need to know where they're willing to be picked up," Quick said.

## BUSES WILL USE HOT LANES

Ramped-up bus service to Northern Virginia and Washington from the Fredericksburg area has been proposed as part of the high occupancy toll lane project on Interstate 95. Buses would use two new lanes running in the median of I-95, an extension of high occupancy vehicle lanes from Dumfries to the Massaponax area. The project is supposed to produce at least \$195 million to pay for transit improvements along the I-95 corridor, and three bus routes have been identified that would originate in the Fredericksburg area.

However, those plans do not indicate who would provide the bus service--government, the private sector or both. It's unclear who would make that decision. Also, the HOT lanes project's southern portion from Dumfries to Massaponax is still under environmental review. Construction cannot move forward until Virginia and the project's private partners, Fluor Inc. and Transurban USA, sign a financial agreement.

Conversations about boosting regional commuter bus service have occurred.

"All the experts, and even I can see that as a commuter, you need alternative ways to get around," said Spotsylvania Supervisor Hap Connors. He chairs the region's transportation planning group, the Fredericksburg Area Metropolitan Planning Organization. FAMPO's board grapples with issues that bleed over jurisdictional lines, such as expanding public transit and commuter options and how to pay for it.

A former bus commuter himself, Connors acknowledged that every commuting mode has imperfections, whether it's a vanpool, the train or a carpool. "All have their limitations and limited routes and limited hours of service. And that's why you need to beef those things up and have them all as part of your transportation system," Connors said.

The difficulty will be funding such service. Spotsylvania is currently debating the merits of joining Virginia Railway Express, with detractors saying commuter service that serves only 1,000 people should not be subsidized. King George and Stafford counties this year scaled back local bus service on FREDericksburg Regional Transit due to budget constraints. Private bus operators may be able to receive a small amount of federal funding if they start reporting ridership numbers to a government agency.

Meanwhile, commuters like Brian Batt, 43, of Stafford are eager to ride a bus to work rather than drive or rely on informal arrangements.

A former slug, he now takes Martz to Crystal City.

"After spending a couple nights and cold mornings waiting for a ride, it's just nice knowing the bus is coming," Batt said.

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Searching for a new carpool, vanpool, bus or train?

GWRideConnect is a free ride-matching service for Fredericksburg-area residents. Go to [gwideconnect.org](http://gwideconnect.org) to view carpool and vanpool vacancies, or call 540/373-POOL.

GWRideConnect keeps a database of travel options to a variety of work destinations.

If a bus schedule no longer works for area residents, they may consider a vanpool, said Diana Utz, GWRideConnect director. The service lists more than 400 vanpools in its directory.

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