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Walmart puts its Ferry Farm lot off-limits for commuters

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By KELLY HANNON

Commuters who meet their carpool or vanpool at Walmart in Stafford's Washington Square Plaza on State Route 3 will have to find a new place to park after next Friday.

The Ferry Farm-area Walmart is undergoing a transformation from a standard store to a Walmart Supercenter, which will include a grocery store.

Walmart expects the Supercenter to attract additional customers during the day Mondays through Fridays, and more customer parking will be needed in the shopping center at those times, said Walmart spokeswoman Ashley Hardie.

Consequently, Walmart can no longer allow commuter parking in its lot after Oct. 16, she said.

Until now, about 100 commuters have parked in a sparsely used corner of the lot far from the store entrance. It is a popular meeting place for carpools and vanpools destined for the Dahlgren area of King George.

"It's very convenient for those of us who live in the city or south Stafford," said Rodney Shook of Fredericksburg, who has met a vanpool in the Walmart lot for three years. "At this point, my only alternative is to drive five miles west of the city to the Gordon Road lot. So that's like adding 10 miles to my round trip just to get to the vanpool, whereas it's not out of my way at all to use the Walmart lot."

He thought Walmart allowed commuter parking as part of a good-neighbor policy, he said.

"We're getting such short notice on this," Shook said. "We're scrambling."

The loss of the lot is another setback to commuter parking in the Fredericksburg area. With the temporary suspension of the High Occupancy Toll lane project on Interstate 95, which could have funded thousands of new commuter parking spaces in the Fredericksburg area, there are no active construction plans for new lots under way.

Walmart's tolerance for commuter parking was rare. Although a few shopping centers in the



Commuters will have stop using the lot at the Walmart in southern Stafford as a staging area for vanpools.

Fredericksburg area allow free, informal commuter parking, most do not. The decision to let commuters park in a shopping center is up to individual property owners.

Another informal commuter lot closed in 2008. Due to redevelopment, The Town Center of Aquia in North Stafford ended an informal commuter parking situation, displacing about 100 commuters.

When an informal lot closes, the overflow typically goes to a Virginia Department of Transportation commuter lot.

But there's not always space for newcomers.

Two Virginia Department of Transportation commuter lots in North Stafford fill around 7 a.m. Tuesdays through Thursdays. Public officials have had a hard time convincing shopping centers in the State Route 610 corridor to lease the county parking spaces to meet demand, and commuters have resisted alternatives located too far from I-95.

Federal money is still available for property owners in the Fredericksburg area willing to lease parking spaces to commuters.

The region's free commuter ride-matching serving, GWRideConnect, is aware of the lot's closure, and staff will work with commuters next week to find new parking locations, said Lloyd Robinson, director of transportation planning at the George Washington Regional Commission.

The region's long-range transportation plan for 2035 envisions a commuter lot in southeast Stafford or King George with 500 spaces, but there is no money to build it, Robinson said.

Some VDOT-owned lots in the Fredericksburg area do have space for more commuters. A parking lot on Courthouse Road in Stafford has a few available spaces on most workdays.

Space is also available in the U.S. 17 commuter lot in Stafford, and all three VDOT lots in Spotsylvania: State Route 208, Gordon Road, and the lot behind Ukrop's on Old Salem Church Road.

Of course, none of these will be as convenient for many Dahlgren-area workers. Some would have to drive in the opposite direction from their home, adding time to their commute.

Before joining a vanpool three years ago, Shook drove alone to his job at the Naval Support Facility at Dahlgren. Vanpooling "helps the environment, and I'm saving money on gas and wear-and-tear," Shook said.

Now, without a lot in southeast Stafford or Fredericksburg, vanpooling could be "more trouble than it's worth," he said.

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