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RIDESHARING RISES ON I-95

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By KELLY HANNON

Look to your right and left when you drive into Washington on Interstate 95.

Odds are, if you are outside the Capital Beltway, one of the vehicles you see will be a bus, carpool or vanpool.

Nearly half the region's morning traffic outside the Beltway is ridesharing, according to a report released yesterday by the Northern Virginia Transportation Commission.

Staff at the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments counted cars crossing an area on I-95 north just outside the Beltway in Springfield. The count was conducted between 6 and 9 a.m. on weekdays in fall 2007.

Forty-seven percent of the traffic was ridesharing.

Within that group, 19 percent of the traffic was riding a bus, and 28 percent were in carpools or vanpools.

"What's significant about this is we were 10 miles outside the work center," said Kala Quintana, NVTC's director of public outreach, where transit is more difficult to find.

Quintana said the study shows if "we gave people more [transit] options, they would avail themselves of those options."

High Occupancy Vehicle lanes outside the Beltway get heavy use--not surprising to any commuters from the Fredericksburg area.

Each of the two HOV lanes at Springfield carried an average of 3,100 people an hour between 6 and 9 a.m. Four northbound lanes for general traffic moved around 1,566 people per hour, per lane.

"HOV lanes are holding their own and then some," Quintana said.

"Can you imagine if we didn't have that? Can you imagine how many more traffic lanes we'd have to have? We'd look like L.A.," Quintana said.

The commission can't say how higher gas prices would have changed the numbers.

Gas prices in Virginia were \$2.98 a gallon a year ago, which is lower than the record-high price of \$4.10 a gallon in July. This week, the average price in Virginia is \$2.10 a gallon.

But as recently as last month, the Fredericksburg area's free commuter matching service, GW RideConnect, had received 177 applications.

"I'm very pleased with that number, especially since gas prices have started to drop down," said Diana Utz, director of GWRideConnect. The program matches commuters with carpools, buses, or transit headed to their work destination.

Utz called the study's findings "encouraging and positive."

People who tried transit or ridesharing at the height of high gas prices may stick with their choice. "Once people try a lot of different modes, they stay with those modes," Utz said.

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