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## Local

### Commuters give weeks to the ride



(Arianne Starnes/Baltimore Examiner)

Empty seats are rare on MARC trains to Washington, especially during the morning rush when thousands of Baltimore commuters move onto the trains.

Matthew Santoni, The Examiner  
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**BALTIMORE** - You know you're from Maryland if one hour is an easy commute to work.

It's becoming a telltale sign of Maryland residency, like pronouncing the city's name "Bawlmer" or having a taste for Old Bay, that an hour in traffic or riding mass transit is not considered out of the ordinary for the average worker.

Crashes and congestion permitting, that's about the time it takes to travel 25 miles Beltway-to-Beltway between Baltimore and Washington, two centers that have spread steadily, as more workers take jobs in the suburbs and commute from adjacent counties. That's two hours a day commuting time. Or about 500 hours a year of dodging unsafe drivers and sitting in endless lines of fume-spewing stop-and-go traffic.

That's about three weeks of a driver's life spent on exhaust-filled highways such as Interstate 95 each year. No wonder commuters turn to trains. At least rail commutes take some of the stress out of the ride.

"I used to drive," said Gallaudet University employee Dierdre Mullervy, who takes the MARC commuter train from Baltimore to Washington. "It was horribly congested. Now I take the train."

Mullervy spends most of the journey reading or watching movies on her iPod. Many riders see the train as a chance to squeeze in more work, sleep or relaxation.

"I take the train because of the bad traffic, the cost of gas, and because the service is easier and cheaper," said Zarica Whalen, who takes the MARC from Baltimore to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Hyattsville.

Kristi Ford said it takes her only about 20 minutes to reach her job in downtown Baltimore via the MARC train from Dorsey Station near Columbia.



The road most driven by Maryland commuters in Interstate 95.

"I had to drive into work once last month because the train was delayed," Ford said. "It took me two hours just to wind down, it was so stressful."

Then there's the reliability of rails. Riders feel like they're going to get to work on time.

"Ninety percent of the time it is great — on time and everything," said Richard Greenlee, who has taken the MARC for the last four months while his girlfriend drives their shared car. "Only about 10 percent of the time do we experience delays."

### **Will new jobs in the Baltimore area reverse the trend?**

Baltimore-area commuters are increasingly taking long commutes toward Washington's suburbs in southern Maryland and Northern Virginia, but planners hope that growth tied to military bases near Baltimore and suburban Virginia will reverse some of those trends.

The number of workers commuting from the Baltimore area to the Washington area had grown 26 percent, from 105,668 to 133,196, between 1990 and 2000, according to the most recent commuter census data available. By comparison, only about 155,000 people both lived and worked within Baltimore's city limits in the 2000 census.

Out of all Maryland commuters who cross state lines on their way to work, 62 percent go to Washington. The second-largest share goes to Virginia, which gets about 116,400 Maryland workers every day. Nearly nine out of 10 people who leave Maryland to work travel to Washington or Virginia, according to the Maryland Department of Planning.

Most of the Virginia-bound drivers are from Prince George's, Montgomery and Frederick counties, but about 13,017 workers come from Baltimore and its surrounding counties. The outcome is a very long and very inefficient commute for some, said Hani Mahmassani, who holds the Charles Irish Sr. Chair in Civil and Environmental Engineering at the University of Maryland.

"The fraction of people who work where they live is very small, despite the number of jobs in this region," Mahmassani said.

Since the last census, new jobs have moved north toward Baltimore, but those have drawn commuters from farther afield rather than reclaiming local workers, he said. "At this point, it's becoming like one big megaplex."

The result is a longer commute and a steady increase in traffic along the region's main corridors. Prince George's County had the longest average commute time at about 35 minutes — and that includes those who live and work in the county, according to 2005 census estimates.

In the Baltimore region, Carroll and Harford counties have the longest drive times, averaging 33.2 and 30.6 minutes, respectively.

Mahmassani said growth in information technology companies around Tysons Corner and farther south drove the commuter exodus to Northern Virginia between 1990 and 2000. The Baltimore area has seen its own growth in recent years, but that has spread out among the suburbs such as Howard and Carroll counties, he said.

"If you look at where the job growth has been in the Baltimore area, a lot has been outside of the city limits," Mahmassani said. "On the one hand, you do have growth of the job base, but you have more

people who work in the Maryland suburbs and live elsewhere. It's really flowing in all directions. What strikes me is all the inefficiency from a transportation standpoint. It contributes especially to traffic and sprawl."

But before commuters start considering more comfortable car seats or better distractions for the mass-transit trip, some experts predict that an opportunity for change is on the way.

### **BRAC: An opportunity to reduce commutes**

With the 2005 Base Realignment and Closure Act bringing a net gain of 9,448 on-base jobs to Aberdeen Proving Ground in Harford County and 5,717 jobs to Fort George G. Meade in Anne Arundel County— plus 30,000 or so additional jobs for contractors and support staff — the Baltimore area could recapture some of the workers it has lost to Washington, economic analyst and consultant Anirban Basu said.

"My hope is that BRAC will help reduce commutes, and the state can do much to leverage this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity into support for mass-transit projects," Basu said.

Anne Arundel County is advocating an extension of Metro's Green Line to Baltimore-Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport, where commuters could connect to Baltimore's Light Rail system. As part of its BRAC preparations, Harford County has already received state money to plan a new MARC station at Edgewood, near the southern portion of the base, and it has proposed a multimodal transit station near Aberdeen that would bring together trains, cars and bus routes.

Maryland Department of Transportation Director of Planning Sam Minnitte said the state is trying to remain flexible when deciding which areas will need road and rail improvements because of BRAC.

When the last round of base changes were expected to bring jobs to Patuxent Naval Air Station in southern Maryland, MDOT thought many workers would commute from D.C.'s Virginia suburbs and planned accordingly — yet when the jobs came, many workers moved closer and placed more strain on local roads, Minnitte said.

"Flexibility is going to be very important in the first three to four years," he said. "There's not a stone we'll leave unturned."

As head of the Sage Policy Group, Basu has pushed the possibility that BRAC could also bring more residents to Baltimore City, which has areas within a 45-minute drive of either base and could create a "reverse commute" that could even negate some of the usual traffic.

According to a study of workers living near Aberdeen Proving Ground conducted by the Susquehanna Workforce Network, 90 percent who responded to a random survey said they'd prefer to take a job in their own county, and 25 percent said they'd do so even with a 5 percent salary cut.

"We see it as a real opportunity, because so many workers commute long distances, and should an equal opportunity become available in their own community, they'd take it," Harford County BRAC Coordinator Karen Emery said.

Unfortunately, the state and local governments will first have to lure new workers to live in already developed areas, Basu said, or else risk contributing further to sprawl, as market forces leave workers looking to the suburbs for cheaper homes, more developable land or less-crowded schools.

"Ultimately, the people are coming; the question is, where will they live?" Basu said.

### **D.C.-to-Baltimore commute has its fair share of riders**

The Baltimore-Washington commuter mess is hardly a one-way street.

Where D.C. and its surrounding counties get about 133,000 Baltimore-area commuters each day, the Baltimore region — including Anne Arundel, Baltimore, Carroll, Harford and Howard counties — gets around 42,400 Washington commuters, according to census data.

Harry Goode Jr. takes the hour-long MARC ride each day from his home in D.C. to his Howard County job, which is a short walk from Dorsey Station. Though traffic is less of a problem for Washington-to-Baltimore commuters, both gas and parking expenses make mass transit attractive, he said.

"If I drove, I would get home a lot faster, but this is cheaper," Goode said. He alternates between riding the MARC and riding Amtrak, which is more direct to Washington but more expensive, he said.

"I drove for a while, but it's always a mess unless you leave home at five in the morning," said Shawn Simmons, who commutes to Baltimore in search of a job.

Most Washington-area commuters go to Baltimore's southern suburbs: More than 28,000 work in Anne Arundel and Howard counties, split almost evenly between the two. Almost 9,000 work in Baltimore City. Harford County has slightly fewer than 300 D.C. commuters, most of whom come from Prince George's and Montgomery counties.

— Matthew Santoni

### **Growing pains**

In 2000:

Baltimore commuters to Washington \*

- » Anne Arundel County — 67,675
- » Baltimore County — 12,876
- » Carroll County — 6,190
- » Harford County — 1,815
- » Howard County — 40,178
- » Baltimore City — 8,574

Washington commuters to Baltimore

- » Prince George's County — 21,851
- » Montgomery County — 13,563
- » Washington, D.C. — 2,622

In 1990:

#### Baltimore commuters to Washington

- » Anne Arundel County — 45,054
- » Baltimore County — 10,373
- » Carroll County — 4,510
- » Harford County — 1,231
- » Howard County — 34,735
- » Baltimore City — 9,765

#### Washington commuters to Baltimore

- » Prince George's County — 16,839
- » Montgomery County — 10,152
- » Washington, D.C. — 1,836

\* Baltimore figures include commuters from Anne Arundel, Carroll, Harford and Howard counties, in addition to Baltimore City and Baltimore County. Washington figures include commuters from D.C., Prince George's and Montgomery counties and Northern Virginia

Source: U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey

#### **How long does it take**

In 2005: Average overall commute time for those who work in:

- » Anne Arundel — 27.8 minutes
- » Baltimore County — 27.8 minutes
- » Carroll County — 33.1 minutes
- » Harford County — 30.6 minutes
- » Howard County — 30.2 minutes
- » Baltimore City — 28.7 minutes
- » Montgomery County — 33.2 minutes
- » Prince George's County — 35.7 minutes

Source: U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey

*Examiner Staff Researcher Patrick Skinner contributed to this story.*

msantoni@baltimoreexaminer.com

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