



MEMORANDUM

February 13, 2015

TO: Barbara B. Matthews, City Manager

VIA: Craig L. Simoneau, PE, Director of Public Works

FROM: Katie Mencarini, AICP, Transportation Planner II
Emad Elshafei, PE, Chief of Traffic and Transportation Division

SUBJECT: Local Shuttle Research

Introduction

This memorandum is in response to the Mayor and Council request to explore the feasibility of initiating a local circulator bus system within the City of Rockville. The memorandum includes background on previous efforts and research performed by staff to investigate options to operate a local shuttle bus network in the City, a recent review of the current transit operations in Rockville, and key highlights of a circulator feasibility study conducted in June 2014 for the City of Gaithersburg. The memorandum concludes with a brief analysis of the research conducted.

Background

In the early 2000's, as part of the Town Center redevelopment, the Mayor and Council expressed interest in establishing a shuttle to serve the Town Center and adjacent neighborhoods. The intentions of the shuttle included the following: to connect Town Center and the Rockville Metro Station with neighborhoods and other key destinations such as Montgomery College, Fallsgrove, and Twinbrook; to alleviate traffic congestion along major transportation corridors; and to improve transit conditions for residents, employees and visitors by providing a high-end transit service with attractive buses and short headways.

In 2003, the City successfully pursued a Capital Bus Program Funds Grant from the Federal Transit Administration (FTA), as part of the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (Public Law 109-59; SAFETEA-LU) transportation funding authorization bill. In FY05, the FTA appropriated \$971,779 (of which the City had to provide a 20 percent match) to purchase buses and bus-related facilities. These funds were restricted to the purchase of capital items and could not be used for operational expenses, including salaries and maintenance. City staff researched costs and possible scenarios for spending the grant. Staff presented findings at two Mayor and Council meetings. Staff's findings and the resulting Mayor and Council decisions are summarized in the sections below.

Key Highlights from the two Mayor and Council Meetings

Staff presented cost estimates for scenarios which considered several factors: types of buses to be purchased (fuel type), operational alternatives (city operated/maintained vs. an all-inclusive contract), and possible sizes of the shuttle's fleet. The estimated costs were projected over ten years to account for initial costs, maintenance costs, and the likelihood that costs would increase annually. Assumptions and estimates presented to the Mayor and Council at this meeting are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Cost Estimates for Bus Types and Operation Costs

PURCHASE OPTIONS: \$971,779 Available

Cost Estimates for Useful Life of Transit Vehicles		Year 1	Year 7	Year 10
Alternative	Payee	2007	2013	2016
Alternative A: 2 Natural Gas Buses + 1 Fueling Facility @ \$145k	Federal Share (80% year 1)	\$597,067	\$0	\$0
	City Share (20% year 1)	\$149,267	\$781,735	\$871,935
	Total Cost	\$746,334	\$781,735	\$871,935
Alternative B: 2 Hybrid Diesel-Electric Buses	Federal Share (80% year 1)	\$656,000	\$0	\$0
	City Share (20% year 1)	\$164,000	\$1,092,302	\$1,255,472
	Total Cost	\$820,000	\$1,092,302	\$1,255,472
Alternative C: 3 Diesel Buses	Federal Share (80% year 1)	\$583,200	\$0	\$0
	City Share (20% year 1)	\$145,800	\$947,700	\$1,057,050
	Total Cost	\$729,000	\$947,700	\$1,057,050
Alternative D: 1 Hybrid Diesel-Electric Bus + 1 Diesel Bus	Federal Share (80% year 1)	\$522,400	\$0	\$0
	City Share (20% year 1)	\$130,600	\$862,051	\$980,086
	Total Cost	\$653,000	\$862,051	\$980,086

OPERATING COSTS (2 Shuttles Running)

Operation of Two Shuttles	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10
	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
All-Inclusive Contract *	\$500,000	\$525,000	\$551,250	\$578,813	\$607,753	\$638,141	\$670,048	\$703,550	\$738,728	\$775,664

*Includes drivers, maintenance, fuel, and back-up bus.

TOTAL COSTS TO CITY (Capital + Operating Costs if the City Contracts Operations)

Purchase Alternative	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10
	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Alternative A 2 Natural Gas + 1 Fuel Facility	\$649,267	\$525,000	\$551,250	\$578,813	\$607,753	\$638,141	\$1,451,783	\$703,550	\$738,728	\$1,647,599
Alternative B 2 Hybrid Diesel-Electric	\$664,000	\$525,000	\$551,250	\$578,813	\$607,753	\$638,141	\$1,762,350	\$703,550	\$738,728	\$2,031,136
Alternative C 3 Diesel	\$645,800	\$525,000	\$551,250	\$578,813	\$607,753	\$638,141	\$1,617,748	\$703,550	\$738,728	\$1,832,714
Alternative D 1 Hybrid + 1 Diesel	\$630,600	\$525,000	\$551,250	\$578,813	\$607,753	\$638,141	\$1,532,099	\$703,550	\$738,728	\$1,755,750

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Table 1 includes cost estimates developed in 2006 for the purpose of evaluating possible bus types as well as estimates for operations and maintenance. The first part of the table shows the capital cost estimates for four different combinations of bus types, fleet sizes, and additional infrastructure as needed¹.

- Alternative A consists of purchasing two natural gas buses and a fueling facility.
- Alternative B consists of purchasing two hybrid diesel electric buses. This alternative yields the least amount of vehicles and the highest cost overall.
- Alternative C consists of purchasing three diesel buses. The City already has a fueling facility that supports diesel engines and therefore a new fueling facility will not be needed.
- Alternative D is a combination of Alternatives B and C and consists of purchasing one hybrid diesel-electric bus and one diesel bus. This is the least expensive option.

The second section of the table shows the estimated operating costs of an all-inclusive contract, which was the recommendation staff made at the meeting. This is based on a quote acquired by staff. The contract would cover salaries for drivers, maintenance, fuel, and a back-up bus. Recognizing that fuel and other costs would increase over time, cost estimates were projected over ten years.

The final section of the table shows the total costs (capital and operating costs) to the City across the four bus type alternatives. These estimates add the cost of the bus purchase options in the first part of the table to the estimated cost of operating the busses through a contractor, projected over ten years. It is important to note that the projected life span of a bus is approximately 10 years. This means after 10 years the City will need to resolve a significant capital cost to replace the fleet and grant funding in the future is not guaranteed.

In addition to cost estimates, staff presented six possible routes that varied in length (1.7-3.3 miles) along with projected headways and ridership. A brief description of each proposed route is included below and summarized in Table 2. Maps for each of the routes are included in Attachments A-F.

- **Route 1:** A 1.7 mile loop connecting Rockville Metro station, Town Center, and Montgomery College via Hungerford Road (MD 355) and N. Washington Street.
- **Route 2:** A modification of Route 1 that adds the Heritage Park and West End neighborhoods as well as Richard Montgomery High School.
- **Route 3:** A 2.9 mile loop that connects Rockville Town Center, the Charles Walk and East Rockville neighborhoods via Stonestreet Avenue, North Horners Lane, Park Road and Veirs Mill Road.
- **Route 4:** This route connects the Rockville Metro station, Town Center and the Woodley Gardens and West End neighborhoods via Matins Lane, Mannakee Street and West Montgomery Avenue.
- **Route 5:** This loop connects the Rockville Metro station, Town Center, West End neighborhood, and Richard Montgomery High School via MD 355.
- **Route 6:** The route essentially combines Routes 1 and 5, providing connections to Montgomery College, Town Center, Richard Montgomery High School and Wotton Parkway via MD 355, N. Washington Street, and Stonestreet Avenue.

It should be noted that specific stops were not identified as these were presented as preliminary routes for planning purposes.

¹ For ease, staff only showed projected estimates for Year 7 and Year 10. Actual estimates for Years 1-10 were calculated and are available.

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Table 2: Summary of Possible Town Center Shuttle Routes

	Routes					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Length in Miles	1.7	2.7	2.9	3.3	2.9	3.2
Projected Headways With 2 Shuttles in Operation*	9	15	20	17	21	13
Projected Daily Ridership	726	202	122	87	82	58

*Based on distance and possible delays at major intersections and uncontrolled/unsignalized left turns. Staff drove these routes to determine the projected headways.

Additionally, staff presented a comparison of three existing shuttle/trolley routes in Montgomery County: Van Go, King Farm Shuttle, and Bethesda Circulator. Characteristics of each route are summarized in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Summary of Local Shuttle Routes in Montgomery County (updated from 2007)

	Van Go	King Farm	Bethesda Circulator
Funded By	Montgomery County	King Farm Conservancy	Parking lot district, private sponsorship
Operated By	Montgomery County	ATC/Connex Transit Services	First Transit (managed by Bethesda Unified Partnership)
Annual Operating Cost ²	\$240,000 per shuttle	\$250,000 per shuttle	\$240,000 per bus
Fare	\$0	\$0	\$0
Number of Routes	1	3	2
Route Length	2.2 miles	2.6, 2.6, 2.4 miles	2.2 miles
Hours of Operation	7 AM to 7 PM	6:30 AM to 7:30 PM (with 2 breaks)	7 AM to 12 AM, M-Th 7AM to 2AM, Fri 6PM to 2AM, Sat
Headway (minutes)	12	20 (average for 3 routes)	8
Daily Ridership/ Shuttle	394	345	750

² This row shows the total operating cost per shuttle. It should be noted to maintain 10-15 minute headways, circulators typically maintain a fleet of four to five busses, depending on the length of the route. These buses will likely need to be replaced every 10 years.

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Outcomes from the Mayor and Council Meetings

After discussing staff's findings, the Mayor and Council determined that operating and maintaining a shuttle service would not be a sustainable venture for the City. The grant would provide money for acquiring buses, but to cover fuel, maintenance, drivers' salaries, and branding would cost the City hundreds of thousands of dollars on an annual basis. There was concern that low projected daily ridership did not justify the high costs. Also, it was clear that low ridership meant that fares would not be a viable revenue source to sustain ongoing operational costs. It was also apparent that the desired shuttle routes would significantly overlap existing transit routes serviced by WMATA and Montgomery County Ride-On. With this in mind, staff contacted Montgomery County Transit Services to discuss possible modifications of Ride-On Route 45, the only route that was (and still is today) completely contained within the City limits. City staff negotiated for additional stops in Town Center and extending the terminus westward to provide transit destinations in Fallsgrove. In return, the City offered give the grant money to the County (the FTA contribution and the City's match), and Ride-On would assume responsibility of operation and maintenance of the buses. Staff researched the possibility of covering the fare for residents to emulate the circulator experience in Silver Spring and Bethesda. The annual cost to eliminate the Ride-On Route 45 fare would have been \$150,000.

An agreement was reached, and a Memorandum of Understanding was executed between the City and the County to transfer the grant and City matching funds for the acquisition of six clean diesel buses, with additional funds to cover the costs of branding the buses with a logo and 'Round Rockville name. The Mayor and Council decided not to include an ongoing fare subsidy in the agreement. As a result, Route 45 patrons pay the same fare as they do for other Ride-On routes. A map showing the route modifications negotiated is included in Attachment G.

The modified route and branded buses were in service from 2008-2010 when the buses were removed as part of a system-wide recall after several buses experienced engine fires. This setback was the beginning of a number of challenges associated with Ride-On Route 45. The buses were put back into circulation a year later but were removed again for mechanical issues. Ride-On Route 45 has been in danger of elimination within the past four years due to budget constraints and relatively low ridership. In 2010, County Executive Ike Leggett proposed eliminating the route. The route was spared and the number of trips along the line was preserved, however, the hours of operation were significantly reduced³.



Montgomery County Ride-On Route 45 bus
 outfitted with the City of Rockville Branding.
 Source: maxforrockville.com

When the buses were scheduled to be replaced, the County approached the City to fund the 'Round Rockville branding for the new buses per the agreement. During the FY13 budget discussion, the Mayor and Council opted not to fund the branding.

Recent Review of Existing and Planned Local Transit Routes

Staff conducted preliminary research on the current transit lines/routes available in the City today and the possibility of implementing a circulator network in the near future. Staff reviewed current WMATA and Ride-

³ Go Montgomery! Archive online.

<http://www6.montgomerycountymd.gov/apps/News/Blog/pioBlog.asp?blogID=17&blogItemID=1075>
 Accessed July 14, 2014.

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On routes that connect Town Center with the Rockville Metro station, Montgomery College, and Twinbrook Metro station; four destinations that would likely be included in any considered circulator system for the City. Staff also examined the Transit Corridors Functional Master Plan that includes a network of bus rapid transit routes adopted by the County Council in December of 2013. The routes are summarized below.

Montgomery County Ride-On 45 Route

This route still exists virtually as it did when it was augmented in 2008 for the 'Round Rockville transit line. The route makes an east-west connection between the Twinbrook neighborhood, Montgomery College, Town Center, and the Fallsgrove Regional Transit Center. Service begins at 5:25 AM and the last bus ends at both terminals at around 8:30 PM. During peak hours, the estimated headway is 15 minutes. As previously stated, the Mayor and Council paid to have the buses branded with the 'Round Rockville' logo. After the buses needed to be replaced and ultimately rebranded, the Mayor and Council decided not to pay for the rebranding of the buses. Although ridership has remained relatively low, the route still serves Rockville residents, employees, and visitors without any additional City funds (a map of Route 45 is included in Attachment H).

Montgomery County Ride-On 46 Route

This is a north-south route connecting Shady Grove Metro station and the National Institute of Health Medical Center via MD 355. There are approximately 10 stops (in each direction) between Town Center and the Twinbrook Metro station. Peak headway for these stops is approximately 15 minutes. Daily average ridership numbers are relatively low ranging between 345 for northbound and 430 for southbound. While these numbers are sustainable for service, this does not suggest that there is a need for relief or additional service. Rebranding this route would also not be an appropriate option as the two terminuses are located outside of City limits (a map of Route 46 is included in Attachment I).

Planned BRT Routes

In the adopted BRT plan, three routes are planned with stops in the City. The first connects Redgrave in Clarksburg and the Rockville Metro station (355 North) and the second connects the Rockville Metro station and Washington, D.C. (355 South) along MD 355. Four stops are located on the 355 South line between the Rockville and Twinbrook Metro stations. A third line will connect the Rockville Metro station to the Twinbrook area via MD 587. Because there are so few stops along MD 355 and MD 587, the BRT network alone is unlikely to serve the same purpose of a local circulator. The BRT line will reduce congestion of through traffic between northwestern Montgomery County and the District of Columbia. However, the Adopted BRT Plan envisions the BRT as a feeder to regional rail lines operated by WMATA and MARC, and in turn local bus routes such as Ride-On will become local feeders to the BRT corridors. The plan suggests that as BRT lines are planned, there will be a system-wide evaluation of local Ride-On routes to identify opportunities for the purpose of improving access between underserved areas and BRT stations⁴.

New Research in the Planning Transit Field

In addition to reviewing previous Mayor and Council decisions, staff conducted preliminary research on best practices and recent findings in the transit planning field. On July 15, 2014 the Transportation Research Board released a new Transit Cooperative Research Program (TCRP) Report, number 167, titled, "Taking Effective Fixed-Guideway Transit Investments: Indicators of Success" that provides a data-driven, indicator-

⁴ Montgomery County Planning Department. (2013). *Approved and Adopted Countywide Transit Corridors Functional Master Plan*. Retried from http://montgomeryplanning.org/transportation/highways/documents/countywide_transit_corridors_plan_2013-12.pdf

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based model for predicting the success of a fixed-guideway transit project⁵. As the title suggests, the report includes common factors among successful local transit routes that can help transit providers better understand the demand and likelihood of success. Key findings from the report include the following:

- High density of employment and/or population within a half-mile of the station is the most influential factor for a successful transit route.
- Lack of free and available parking will also yield an increase in ridership (Conversely an abundance of free parking can significantly undermine success of a transit route).
- Congestion along major corridors will increase the likelihood of success for a new or augmented transit route.

Similar findings were included in a circulator feasibility study commissioned by the City of Gaithersburg, completed in June of 2014⁶. The study evaluated existing conditions within the City and included seven case studies of successful and unsuccessful circulator transit systems in the DC Metropolitan area. The commonalities among successful circulators included the following:

- Frequent reliable service, with headways of 10 minutes or less.
- Simple and direct routing that provides the following: “last mile connections,”⁷ transit access between transportation hubs, and express service to large school and employment campuses.
- Low or free fares.
- Stable reliable funding.
- Clear purpose, such as a “mobility pain point,” which can be caused by limited or expensive parking, long walk distances, and heavy traffic congestion.

Successful circulator networks identified by the study included the Bethesda Circulator, Baltimore’s Charm City Circulator, Washington, D.C.’s Circulator, and the Annapolis Circulator Trolley. The case studies also included the unsuccessful launch of the GEORGE circulator in Falls Church, Virginia. The GEORGE ultimately failed because the headways were too long (20 minutes), there was too much free parking available at major destinations, and the project lacked reliable funding. Grants were secured for the capital costs, but the low fares and lack of additional funding sources made it unsustainable after only few years.

With these lessons in mind, the consultant studied the existing conditions and potential demand for a circulator network within a defined study area in the City of Gaithersburg. After evaluating three possible options, the study concluded that a new, independent circulator service would not be the most cost-effective option. Instead, the study recommended the City work with Montgomery County to modify existing Ride-On service in ways that could make existing local transit routes more efficient and reliable. Aside from changing the routes and updating printed materials, the only major costs would be the capital costs of adding two to

⁵ Federal Transit Administration: Transportation Research Board of the National Academies. (2014). *Transit Cooperative Research Program (TCRP) Report 167: Making Effective Fixed-Guideway Transit Investments: Indicators of Success provides a data-driven, indicator-based model for predicting the success of a fixed-guideway transit project*. Retrieved from http://onlinepubs.trb.org/onlinepubs/tcrp/tcrp_rpt_167.pdf

⁶ City of Gaithersburg. (2014) *Gaithersburg Circulator Study: Final Report*. Retrieved from http://www.gaithersburgmd.gov/~media/city/documents/government/city_projects/circulator_bus/final_report.pdf

⁷ The term “last mile” has emerged to describe the often critical gap between a transit hub, such as a rail station and a major employment center. The distance, while often less than a mile, can still be challenging to walk because of either distance or a physical barrier. Last mile solutions, such as circulators, bike share programs, and shared use pathways, make it feasible for people to bike or take another transit option to reach their destination, and travel the “last mile” of their journey from home to work and vice versa.

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three buses to the fleet during peak hours to improve headways, and the operational costs for staffing and maintaining the additional buses. The reasons for the final recommendation included the following:

1. Gaithersburg has adequate to high levels of free parking at transit centers, office campuses, and retail establishments.
2. While the City has made strides to improving the pedestrian and bicycle connectivity of the City as a whole, the connections between destinations and transit are poor. Barriers such as Interstate 270, make it difficult to connect commuters or visitors to their destinations from the transit hubs.
3. The consultants were not convinced that the City of Gaithersburg would have a stable and reliable source of funding for both upfront capital costs and annual costs of operations. When evaluating a traditional circulator route in the form a single loop with bi-directional service, the cost of the first year was over two million dollars, and would cost just over one million dollars to maintain that service every year. These estimates were calculated with the assumption that a vendor would provide the transit service and maintain the vehicles, which in this region has proven to be the most economical way to launch and operate a new transit service. While Gaithersburg could acquire funding from grants and other municipal sources to cover capital costs, the study showed that when relying on grants and trusts, circulators will likely fail.
4. The study found that while there were challenges with existing transit routes, there were not significant gaps in the transit network that could not be solved by other, less expensive means. The areas with potential demand for transit were already using what is available, and any future circulator would likely take riders from those routes, rather than generate new and higher demand for transit.

A comparison between Gaithersburg's operation environment characteristics and those of other circulator networks in the Washington Metropolitan Area are summarized in Figure 4-1 of the Gaithersburg feasibility study, also shown on the next page.

Figure 4-1 Comparison of Operating Environment Characteristics

	DC Circulator	Charm City Circulator	Bethesda Circulator	GEORGE	Gaithersburg
Pedestrian-friendly street grid	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗
Attractions all day (18-hour day)	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓
High population density	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗
High employment density	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗
Limited parking availability	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗
Charge for parking	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗
Frequent, all-day transit (15 minutes or less, 18 hours a day)	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓
Steady high ridership all day and all week	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗
Free circulator fare	✗	✓	✓	✗	

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The City of Rockville would face similar challenges to those identified for the City of Gaithersburg. For example, the timing may not be ripe for a new transit route for even the heavily congested MD 355 corridor. While there is high density development for residential and employment within segments of MD 355, the convenience of free parking influences people's decisions to continue driving to and from destinations along the corridor. Additionally, while congestion is present, it does not appear to be at a high enough threshold to influence transit ridership at this time.

Conclusion

Staff developed a theoretical minimum estimate of the capital and operating costs based on research, best practices, and cost estimates developed in 2006-2007 to provide the Mayor and Council insights into what it would roughly cost to initiate a local circulator route. This estimate assumes that the route length would likely be 2-3 miles, which is typical for a circulator route. The assumed headway is between 15-20 minutes, which would require at least two active shuttle buses. More would be needed to reduce headway times. A third back-up bus would need to be purchased to continue service during maintenance and down time. The estimate also assumes that the City would pursue an all-inclusive contract to operate the route.

Considering these assumptions, the minimum cost of providing a circulator within the City of Rockville would be at \$1,025,000 for the first year to purchase and operate three clean diesel buses, followed by operational costs of at least \$500,000 for the following years until the buses are replaced (approximately 10 years from the launch year). It should be noted that this estimate is conservatively low as it applies quotes and estimates generated from 2006-2007.

Updated costs can be found in the 2014 Gaithersburg feasibility study, which estimates a total cost of roughly 2.3 million dollars to launch a circulator route in the first year with five buses. The capital costs of purchasing the vehicles and bus stop furniture (stops, shelters, etc.) was \$1, 280,000, and annual operating costs were estimated at \$1,000,900. It is possible that the actual cost would be higher, as it appears that the study did not include expenses for hiring a vendor to run the service and provide trained drivers in their estimate.

Initial costs are not the only concern. As with the Cities of Gaithersburg, and Falls Church, the challenge for local transit is a sustainable funding source. The Bethesda Circulator is funded with revenues from the Bethesda Parking Lot District, which includes over 5,400 spaces in several garages and lots owned by Montgomery County. Additional funding comes from sponsorships of the buses that the Bethesda United Partnership⁸ solicits. The DC Circulator is sustained by general operating funds, parking revenues, and some farebox revenue. Rockville would need to secure a steady revenue stream to fund the recurring annual costs.

Demand for a circulator is another issue. Ridership levels for Ride-On 45 have been on the decline and as a result the route has been in danger of being cut by the County Executive more than once. Ridership levels may be low because it is easy to find free parking in the City. While drivers have to pay for parking on Montgomery College's campus and in the Town Center area, there are already transit routes connecting these areas. Ride-On headways within the Town Center area and along MD 355 are relatively short (approximately 10 minutes). These conditions were the same when the shuttle was first investigated in the early 2000's.

⁸ The Bethesda United Partnership is a publicly-funded entity that provides urban district services to the downtown, including transportation demand management (TDM), helping residents and employers find alternatives to driving.

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When comparing the review of recent circulator study efforts with the research conducted by staff in the early- and mid-2000's, it appears that conditions in Rockville have not changed significantly. Public opinion appears to be generally positive towards innovative transit options, but people are still choosing to drive to their destinations. While a study would evaluate the feasibility for a circulator network in finer detail, it is likely that the results will echo the findings of the last decade. This is not to say that current transit conditions are ideal and cannot be improved. As the study in Gaithersburg recommended, it may be more effective and sustainable to reach out to Montgomery County and WMATA to explore opportunities to improve existing routes within the City than it would be to launch another independent transit system.

CLS/KM/kmc

Attachments

Day file















