

Report of the Working Group on Airport Transportation
WMATA Riders Advisory Council

Executive Summary

In February 2012, the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) Riders' Advisory Council (RAC) formed a working group to evaluate the state of public transportation options to the region's airports and recommend actions to improve the rider experience.

The working group found a patchwork of airport transportation services which garner precious little coordination among the relevant stakeholders. Both the Dulles (IAD)-serving 5A Metrobus and privately operated Washington Flyer service have survived primarily through neglect rather than conscious planning. As a result, both underperform in spite of demonstrated demand for their services. The Baltimore-Washington International (BWI)-serving B30 Metrobus is well-conceived and efficiently run, but suffers from inattention to the rider experience.

All of the services considered by the working group lack a coherent strategy to attract and retain ridership. Signage is poor, information on routing is sparse, and there is no visible intra-agency branding effort to raise awareness of public transport options to the airport among residents or visitors to the area. Small issues such as poorly positioned bus stops, lack of consideration for luggage, and difficulty in payment combine to dissuade even regular users of public transportation from taking advantage of these services.

While WMATA, regional transit authorities, and the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority (MWAA) have started to discuss adjustments to existing airport transportation options in anticipation of the Silver Line, the 5A remains absent from those plans. The working group received conflicting information about how the Washington Flyer service will operate once the Silver Line opens.

The working group has crafted a series of recommendations for WMATA, MWAA, and other stakeholders to consider, including:

- Formation of an interagency working group to coordinate and plan airport transportation options for the opening of the Silver Line.
- Addressing the need for additional payment options on the 5A, B30, and Washington Flyer.
- Addressing accessibility issues at the Greenbelt station through adjustments to existing infrastructure.
- Revisiting signage issues to increase rider knowledge about airport services.
- Studying the possibility of moving the 5A terminus, either to a more accessible stop at L'Enfant Plaza or another area in the District of Columbia.
- Studying the possibility of branding airport buses, adding additional luggage racks, and utilizing charter-style buses.

Introduction and Report Timeline

In February 2012, the WMATA Riders' Advisory Council formed a working group to look at public transit access to the region's airports. RAC members voiced concerns with the convenience, service quality, and coordination issues surrounding transit access to airports, and resolved to gather further information on the subject.

With Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport already well-served by Metrorail, the working group concentrated its efforts on public transport access to Dulles International (IAD) and Baltimore Washington International (BWI). In particular, the group focused on the 5A and B30 bus routes, the Washington Flyer service between West Falls Church and Dulles, and the upcoming Silver Line Metrorail service.

The working group met with several groups to gather the information for this report. WMATA officials provided information on the 5A and B30 bus lines. MWAA officials met with the group to discuss existing airport transportation options and future plans for connections to the first phase of the Silver Line. In addition, the working group met with Destination DC to talk about the impact of airport access on the region's tourism.

This report details the working group's findings and recommends a series of actions for consideration by WMATA, MWAA, and other regional authorities to improve the quality and usage of public transportation at DC area airports. It is divided into three sections. The first section details the current state of public transportation options to IAD and BWI. The second section looks at policy and ridership questions. The third section details the working group's recommendations.

This report reflects the information gathered by the RAC in the course of its meetings with regional officials, and the opinions of the RAC. It is not necessarily reflective of the policies or views of WMATA, MWAA, Destination DC, or any other body.

Current Airport Transport Options: An Overview

The 5A

The 5A bus currently runs between L'Enfant Plaza and Dulles Airport, with stops at Rosslyn and the Herndon Park and Ride. Service is approximately every forty minutes on weekdays between 4:50 AM and 11:40 pm; headways are hourly on the weekends.

The 5A started life as an earmark. In 2005, District of Columbia lawmakers established a two year grant to WMATA which created a reverse commute service designed to bring workers from DC to employers in Tyson's Corner and the Dulles corridor. The service was not specifically designed as a link between Dulles airport and regional population centers – airport access was

considered an ancillary benefit.¹ The service was originally split between the 5A (which ran between L'Enfant Plaza and Dulles airport) and the 5B (which ran on the same route, but ended at the Tysons West*Park Transit Station). 5B service was merged into the 5A in 2006.

In the absence of a dedicated funding stream, WMATA planned to discontinue service at the expiration of the grant period. As individual jurisdictions and business interests recognized the value of the line, however, a loose agreement was reached whereby the line would remain in place with costs distributed among the jurisdictions whose riders most used the service. Over time, that formula has varied, with Fairfax in particular lowering its contribution and the District of Columbia picking up the slack.

WMATA officials told the working group that the 5A has survived primarily because it falls outside of the usual jurisdictional discussions about subsidies and ridership. Up to this point, they have operated under the assumption that the 5A will “continue in perpetuity until someone notices.” The start of Silver Line service will likely force a re-examination of the line in the coming year, although a [January 2013 Silver Line bus adjustment plan](#) did not mention the 5A.

As noted in the recent ridership study, the 5A service is utilized by a curious and often unpredictable mix of commuters, tourists, and airport employees. The 5A offers airport employees and tourists a transfer-free ride into the District which is far cheaper (and occasionally faster) than the Metrorail-Washington Flyer route. WMATA officials note that despite the recent doubling of the 5A fare, it remains a cheap alternative to commuter bus services into the District which are sponsored by Fairfax County. The price difference between the two services likely accounts for high ridership from the Herndon Park and Ride station in particular.²

When asked about the possibility of re-splitting the 5A into separate services for commuters and airport patrons, WMATA officials agreed that the demand for two services, as demonstrated by both passenger numbers and demand surveys, is certainly there. Yet in the absence of a political impetus backed up by funding from the jurisdictions, WMATA officials believe that re-splitting the 5A is unlikely to occur.

¹ The location of Dulles airport in Loudon County, which is not part of the regional transportation compact, further complicates the jurisdictional issues surrounding the 5A.

² An interesting aside about the demand for reliable airport transportation to Dulles comes from the temporary closure of National Airport in the wake of 9/11. While National Airport's future was still being determined, Arlington created a bus route from Crystal City to Dulles via Rosslyn as a way to make Dulles more accessible for passengers who would normally fly out of National. In thirty-three days of operation, the route carried over 15,000 people and proved to be immensely popular. The considerable expenses of the route made its operations unsustainable as anything more than a temporary solution, however. The line operated with non-WMATA contract coaches, and the lack of Smartrip equipment of the buses meant that staff were dispatched to every stop to sell tickets. Given the large staffing costs associated with the service, Arlington transportation officials assessed that it would be cheaper to offer it for free so as to eliminate the need for a cost-intensive ticketing system.

Despite the 5A's popularity as a means of airport transportation, MWAA is completely disconnected from the service, both in financial and policy terms. When the line began operations, MWAA was noticeably uncooperative. The original 5A stop was located far from the terminal building and marked with a black and white sign that did not conform to WMATA signage standards, making it confusing to regular system riders. (MWAA originally argued that WMATA signage did not conform to the airport's color scheme.) The stop was eventually moved in closer to the arrivals area and standard WMATA signage was permitted.

WMATA officials note, however, that barriers to use of the 5A remain in place at Dulles: WMATA is still unable to post signs within the airport itself directing passengers to the 5A; official airport announcements in the arrivals area tell customers that the Washington Flyer and MWAA-sponsored taxis are the only forms of airport transportation endorsed and authorized by the airport authority; airport employees do not currently receive Smartbenefits from MWAA which could potentially be used on the 5A; and there is no place to purchase a Smarttrip card within the terminal.

When asked about these structural operational constraints, MWAA officials responded that historic preservation issues have long restricted signage in Dulles Airport. The original design for the terminal had no signage at all, and since then adding additional signage of any kind (even in the official Eero Saarinen-designed font) has proven challenging as it must be reviewed and approved by the Virginia Historic Preservation Society. MWAA officials implied that addition of standard WMATA signage for the 5A within the Dulles terminal building would be unlikely to pass this review.

Smarttrip kiosks at Dulles would also have to conform with the results of an ongoing MWAA study which will reassess the curbside allocation of space for ground transportation options in the arrivals area at Dulles. Since historic preservation issues restrict expansion of curbside space in the arrivals area, MWAA is looking for ways to organize the hotel courtesy vans, taxis, bus service, and parking/rental car shuttles so as to better accommodate demand and provide clear way finding instructions to passengers. Results of the curbside transportation study are expected in mid- to late-2013.

The Washington Flyer Bus

The Washington Flyer Bus runs a non-stop service every half hour between Dulles Airport to the West Falls Church metro stop. Headways are every thirty minutes between 5:45 AM and 10:45 PM.

MWAA contracts with an outside vendor to operate the Washington Flyer bus service from Dulles to the West Falls Church Metro station. The Washington Flyer service once ran to downtown DC, but the unprofitability of that service caused it to be discontinued as contractors proved unwilling to bid. The current Washington Flyer service also operates at a net loss – MWAA provides contract incentives to cover the gap between revenues from riders and expenditures by the contractor. In the most recent Washington Flyer bus contract, MWAA agreed to bear the costs of maintaining the bus fleet as an incentive for contractors to maintain

the service. Limiting the operating hours of the Washington Flyer bus was also designed to boost its attractiveness to outside bidders.

The current Washington Flyer bus contract will expire in late 2014, nearly one year after the first phase of the Silver Line is expected to come online. MWAA officials told the working group that in the absence of changes to the contract initiated by the contractor, the Washington Flyer bus service will continue to only serve the West Falls Church Metro station even after the first phase of the Silver Line opens. After that meeting, a [bus service plan](#) hinted that the Washington Flyer will be rerouted to Wiehle Avenue, but gave no indication of how the contractual issues with MWAA will be overcome.

The B30

The B30 runs a direct, no-stop service between BWI and the Greenbelt Metro station. Headways are approximately forty minutes on both weekdays between 6:10 AM and 10:00 PM and weekends between 8:45 a.m. and 10:45 p.m.

The B30 is funded entirely by the Maryland Department of Transportation. It was brought online in November 2001 as a way for BWI to expand its market share in the region, and continues to benefit from the continued involvement of airport authorities and state transportation officials.

WMATA officials note that they have a “good business relationship” with their counterparts at MDOT and BWI, both of which see the B30 as part of their overall plan to enhance airport access for residents of the DC area. This positive cooperation is evident especially during holiday periods, when WMATA and MDOT work together to augment the usual B30 schedule with additional buses to account for increased airport usage.

Unlike the 5A, the B30 is a direct point-to-point service designed specifically to transport airport passengers to and from Metrorail services. Like the 5A, however, the passenger mix of the B30 is not always what transportation planners may have expected. For example, ridership surveys indicate that the B30 is used as a relatively inexpensive and direct connection between Metrorail and Baltimore’s light rail system, making it an attractive option for certain commuters who use BWI as a transit point rather than a final destination. WMATA officials noted, however, that the use of the B30 as a means of connecting to the Baltimore light rail system was little understood and likely required further study.

Discussion

The working group raised a series of rider concerns on airport transportation with WMATA and MWAA officials. The following section details the discussion which resulted from those questions.

Payment Issues

The exact fare requirement on airport transportation is a frequently raised issue in both the 5A and B30 studies. While this is not generally a concern for established Smartrip users, it is a particularly onerous barrier for visitors who do not have a Smartrip card (as is the case for many visitors to our region). The lack of change machines or Smartrip kiosks at any of the current airport bus stops leaves visitors few alternatives if they did not plan ahead to pay a \$6 fare. Smartrip cards are not available on-board the vehicles.

MWAA officials expressed their support for Smartrip sales within Dulles Airport, and noted that doing so would primarily be a matter of WMATA connecting with the vendors who currently operate there. The addition of an automated Smartrip card kiosk was also discussed. MWAA officials voiced initial support for the idea, but noted that it was unlikely to pass review by the Virginia Historic Preservation Society.

The working group noted that interoperability of the Charm card (the Maryland Transit Administration's automated fare card) and Smartrip card are not advertised on signage within BWI and at the airport bus stop, potentially confusing riders who may not be aware that either card can be used in place of cash on the B30.

WMATA officials noted that in the medium term, a credit card payment system may eliminate payment problems on airport bus services, but it was also acknowledged that this is several years away. The credit card payment system as currently designed is not slated to have a receipt function, which the working group noted is a barrier for business travelers who may require a receipt for reimbursement purposes, or those who use receipts to verify electronic transactions.

The working group raised the possibility of using Smartrip cards on the Washington Flyer bus as a way to create a more seamless experience for frequent transit users. This would not necessarily require the addition of fare machines to the buses themselves. A single fare machine could be installed at the Washington Flyer embarkation point at Dulles Airport for the purposes of processing both arriving and departing passengers.

Another option would be to incorporate pre-paid airport transportation into an all-in-one tourist card like the "[Power Pass](#)", allowing tourists to buy one ticket that would work not only for transportation to the airport, but also for area attractions.

B30 Access Issues at Greenbelt Metrorail Station

The working group noted that while the B30 stop at Greenbelt is easily accessed by rail passengers, it is not easily accessed from the Greenbelt parking lot. In particular, the "multi-day" parking spots set aside primarily for B30 users at the Greenbelt station are located on the opposite end of the parking lot from the B30 stop, necessitating either a precarious hurdling of a fence accompanied by a dash across the bus arrivals area, or a circuitous walk through a parking lot which is often dark and deserted at night. Neither option is attractive to airport passengers with luggage or small children.

WMATA officials told the working group that reconfiguration of the multi-day parking spaces at Greenbelt may be an option, but such an action would have to balance the needs of daily commuters against the needs of occasional B30 riders. Working group members noted that charging an additional fee for the multi-day spots could be a reasonable way to separate commuter parking areas from those used by B30 customers. It was recommended that transformation of the existing “kiss and ride” lot into a lot specifically for B30 users would be a way to implement this recommendation. The possibility of an additional B30 stop closer to the existing multi-day parking area could also solve the problem without creating an appreciable impact on headways.

5A Access Issues at L’Enfant Plaza Metrorail Station

The working group discussed several issues surrounding the location of the 5A terminus in the District of Columbia. While the current L’Enfant Plaza stop is convenient for commuters who use the service, it has distinct drawbacks for airport passengers, both in terms of the geography of L’Enfant Plaza in particular and the broader question of locating the 5A terminus closer to population centers.

The easternmost D street exit from the L’Enfant Plaza Metrorail station is closed on weekends, making the nearby 5A bus stop at 7th and D SW both difficult to locate and hard to reach with luggage. WMATA officials said that relocating the 5A terminus to the Maryland Avenue exit would solve this issue, although getting buy-in from DDOT would be very difficult as parking in the area would be impacted. It was noted that setting up the existing 5A terminus took many months of liaison work between WMATA and city officials.

The working group also discussed the lack of signage or other information within the L’Enfant Plaza station to direct passengers to the 5A, particularly in light of confusion surrounding the closure of the eastern D street exit on the weekends. WMATA officials noted that per system standards, no bus-related signage is currently allowed within Metrorail stops. While the 5A service may be unique in terms of the need for additional signage, it would be difficult to create an exception from usual standards for this particular service.

The working group discussed the broader question of relocating the 5A terminus in the District to an area closer to population and tourism centers, as L’Enfant Plaza tends to be barren at night and on the weekends. WMATA officials said that relocation of the 5A terminus to a more well-trafficked area would be possible, but doing so would impact headways and traffic patterns. The existing terminus is close to freeway onramps which make the trip to Rosslyn and beyond relatively easy.

Branding

The working group discussed the idea of branding for both the 5A and B30 buses. Currently, there is little to identify the 5A and B30 buses as airport services other than the normal bus signage which can be difficult to spot from a distance. It was suggested that placing a large

airplane on the side of the bus or some other noticeable airport symbol would help riders to identify the 5A and B30 services and increase their visibility.

Officials from Destination DC told the working group that their studies indicate a degree of pent-up demand for public transportation options from the region's airports among visitors to the area. They voiced support for the idea of branding airport bus services as a way to expand ridership among tourists, and noted in particular that incorporating the route, ease of travel, and length of time it takes to get to the airport would help to make airport buses a more attractive option. The impact of such a move on Metro's own branding efforts would have to be considered.

Promoting public transportation to and from the region's airports may also be a matter of educating tourists long before they travel. According to Destination DC, many international package tourists or conventioners are advised about airport transport options in information packets they receive well before arrival. These travelers are often steered towards pre-arranged coach services, taxis or town cars, or shared-van services Super Shuttle or Supreme Airport Shuttle. Reaching out to tour operators to promote use of public transportation alternatives (including sending Smartrip cards in advance to travelers) could increase use of available options.

Luggage and Bus Configuration Issues

The working group discussed the impact of luggage on the 5A and B30 services. Unlike the 5A, the B30 uses six specially outfitted buses with luggage racks. (Refurbishment of the B30 buses for luggage was funded by MDOT – the coalition of jurisdictions which support the 5A has not provided a budget for luggage racks on that route.) Riders noted safety and capacity issues associated with luggage on both routes in recent studies. The working group noted, however, that WMATA did not delve deeply into the luggage issue in the airport ridership studies – the impact of luggage on service levels was not within the scope of either the 5A or the B30 study.

Related to the luggage issue, the type of bus used on the 5A and B30 routes was discussed. WMATA officials noted that the idea of using a charter coach-style bus for airport routes has been discussed several times in the past. Multiple issues have conspired to keep that idea at bay, however.

Up to now, the primary difficulty was maintenance – WMATA did not have the capacity to service a new type of bus at its existing maintenance facilities. As new bus garages are coming online in the coming years, this particular argument against charter coach-style buses will likely become moot. Another problem involves labor – WMATA employees are not paid to handle luggage, and requiring them to do so would likely require a host of changes to employee benefits and job requirements. Finally, charter coach-style buses would not be interchangeable with WMATA's existing bus fleet, reducing the authority's ability to use airport buses on other routes in the system as necessary.

The working group also discussed allocating more of the current bus fleet for use on the 5A and B30 lines to lower headways. WMATA officials noted, however, that there is no money in the

current capital budget for the purchase of additional buses which would make this possible. In the absence of additional sources of capital revenue, expansion of existing airport service is unlikely.

Political Issues and the 5A

WMATA officials note that demand for bus service to the region's airports is likely larger than the service that is currently provided. Constraints on funding, and in particular the inability of WMATA to procure new buses in the absence of dedicated capital funds, are a barrier to expansion of service levels.

In this light, the working group discussed the political aspects of existing and future bus service to Dulles Airport in particular. The 5A currently lacks a political champion – someone who could either deliver a dedicated source of outside funding or allocate operating funds from within WMATA. Without such a foundation of support, the 5A faces an uncertain future. WMATA officials speculated that even funding for a revised 5A shuttle service between Wiehle Avenue and Dulles airport is not assured, given the jurisdictional boundaries involved.

Creation of a political base for the 5A will likely be difficult, given the service's complex geography and unpredictable ridership patterns. Many of the jurisdictions that the 5A traverses do not directly benefit from the service, defying the funding compact that usually serves WMATA well. The lack of involvement and buy-in from MWAA is a further damper on political support for the 5A. Rather than promoting the service as an attempt to gain regional market share (as MDOT does with the B30), MWAA is indifferent to the 5A, which it views as a marginal contributor to passenger volumes at Dulles and perhaps one of the reasons the Washington Flyer remains unprofitable.

The working group surmised that lawmakers and officials in the District are the most likely sources of future political support for accessible airport service. The District has the largest proportion of car-free residents in the region, making it the largest potential customer base for public transportation to the region's airports. Additionally, support for a "walkable, bikeable" lifestyle in DC has garnered considerable political support – the 5A and B30 services could be branded as a critical part of sustaining that lifestyle.

Recommendations

Creating a comprehensive strategy for public transport to the region's airports is not a simple proposition. Complex jurisdictional interests, unpredictable ridership patterns, and lack of clear funding streams all played a role in forming the current state of airport transportation in the DC area, and all of these factors will have to be addressed if the idea of reliable, accessible options is to be advanced.

In general, the working group recommends that WMATA, MWAA, MDOT, and other regional stakeholders come together to consider transportation to the region's airports as a unique yet

essential part of their mandate – one that has not been adequately addressed solely through existing mechanisms of cooperation. Concrete progress on this issue will only happen if the entire experience of transportation to the region’s airports is considered. Piecemeal changes, while they may be welcome as solutions micro-level issues, will not suffice to address the larger perception that the region’s airports are difficult to access on public transportation.

In light of its discussions with a wide variety of stakeholders, the working group recommends the following actions:

Address continued challenges with fare collection by:

- Working with MDOT and MWAA to install Smartrip/Charm vending machines in airport arrival areas and/or airport bus stops.
- Working with MWAA and MDOT to make Smartrip/Charm cards available for sale at airport news kiosks and information booths
- Installing change machines at airport bus stops, the L’Enfant Plaza station, and the Greenbelt station
- Considering the need for receipts in plans for future credit card usage on airport bus service
- Beginning discussions between WMATA, MWAA, and the Washington Flyer contractor on the use of Smartrip cards on the Washington Flyer bus service

Address accessibility issues at the Greenbelt station by:

- Considering either relocation of the B30 stop at the Greenbelt station or adding an additional stop to facilitate ease of movement to the existing multi-day parking spots.
- Considering relocation of the multi-day parking spots to an area closer to the B30 stop.
- Considering creation of a safe short-cut through existing fencing and barriers to reduce the effective distance between existing multi-day parking spots and the B30 stop.
- Considering the creation of an additional fee area for multi-use spots located closer to the B30 stop, perhaps by setting aside the “kiss and ride” lot for this purpose.

Revise signage to include the following:

- Reminders about interoperability between the Charm card and the Smartrip card at the BWI stop
- Guidance in the L’Enfant Plaza station which indicates the location of the 5A terminus, particularly in light of weekend entrance closures

Revisit the issue of the 5A terminus by:

- Opening a dialogue between WMATA and DDOT about relocating the 5A terminus to a visible area near the Maryland Avenue exit at the L’Enfant Plaza station, or

- Studying relocation of the 5A terminus, balancing the need for consistent headways with convenient access

Consider the possibility of branding airport buses with special signage to make the buses more visible to visitors who may not be familiar with WMATA services.

Consider a study to measure the impact of luggage on ridership levels and service quality on the 5A and B30 routes.

Revisit the idea of charter-style buses for airport routes and gauge the system costs in light of recent bus garage capacity improvements.

Build a Dulles Airport Transit Service Coalition to advocate for the concurrent and complementary operation of the 5A, Silver Line, and Washington Flyer. Use this coalition to push for a more holistic approach to airport access.