
MEMORANDUM

TO: MEMBERS, MWAQC
FROM: JEN DESIMONE
SUBJECT: RIDE FREE ON CODE RED PROGRAM
DATE: 7/23/2008
CC: STUART FREUDBERG, DIRECTOR, ENVIRONMENTAL PROGRAMS
JOAN ROHLFS, CHIEF, AIR QUALITY

Background

Automobile emissions are significant contributors of nitrogen oxides (NO_x) and volatile organic compounds (VOCs), pollutant precursors in the formation of ozone. A transit bus program, Ride Free on Code Red, was designed to remove vehicles from the roads and encourage commuters to take public transit on Code Red days.

During the ozone season, local bus providers offer free rides on forecasted Code Red days. MWCOG issues daily air quality forecasts during the ozone season, May- September. Forecasts are emailed and faxed to local transit providers when the air quality is expected to be Code Red. Free rides are provided in Arlington County, City of Alexandria, City of Fairfax, City of Falls Church, Fairfax County, Loudoun County, Prince William County, Montgomery County, Frederick County, and Prince George's County (see Attachment A for a detailed list of transit providers).

Northern Virginia Ride Free Program

Since 1999 the Northern Virginia Transportation Commission (NVTC) has managed the Ride Free program for local transit providers, including WMATA's Metrobuses that operate in Northern Virginia. The program is 100% federally funded through the Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality program (CMAQ).¹

In Northern Virginia free bus rides were offered on 2 days in 2006 and 16 days in 2007.² Since May 1, 2008, free rides have been offered on 2 days and will continue to be offered through September. A Ride Free on Code Red day costs approximately \$120,000 per day in lost revenue to the eight bus providers that operate in Northern Virginia.

Bus service providers offer free fares on forecasted Code Red or worse days in order to promote transit use. Bus drivers are instructed to record the number of boarding passengers. NVTC evaluates the program by comparing the number of Code Red day riders with the ridership on the same day of the week during the three previous weeks. Ridership counts indicate that there is a 4% increase in the number of passengers on a Ride Free day.

¹ The CMAQ program, jointly administered by the FHWA and the Federal Transit Administration (FTA), provides over \$8.6 billion dollars in funds to State DOTs, MPOs, and transit agencies to invest in projects that reduce criteria air pollutants regulated from transportation-related sources.

² In 2007, NVTC piloted a Ride Free program that offered free fares on Code Orange days. On March 12, 2008, EPA revised the national ozone standard which reduced the level of the standard from 85 ppb to 75 ppb. Under the new standard, the Metropolitan Washington region expected double the number of Code Orange days, which made it cost prohibited to continue a Code Orange Ride Free program.

Maryland Ride Free Program

In suburban Maryland, three local transit companies and WMATA offer free bus rides on Code Red days. The counties individually manage their programs and make the decision when to offer free rides. With the exception of Frederick County, MDOT funds the cost of Ride Free on Code Red programs in Maryland. In recent years MDOT's funding amounts to about 35-40% of the costs of the program. WMATA offers free rides on Metrobuses that operate in Montgomery and Prince George's Counties. MDOT provides funding for WMATA Ride Free on Code Red days.

The Frederick County Ride Free on Code Red program is funded 70% from federal and state grants.

In suburban Maryland, free rides were offered on 2 days in 2006 and 0 days in 2007. Since May 1, 2008, free rides have been offered on 2 days and will continue to be offered through September. A typical Ride Free day for a Maryland transit provider costs approximately \$35,000 - \$40,000 per day in lost revenue. Frederick County's lost revenue from the program is approximately \$2,400 per day.

Montgomery County Ride On, TransIT Service of Frederick County, and Prince George's County The Bus evaluate the program by tracking ridership on Ride Free days. Bus drivers record the number of boarding passengers and the results are compared to similar non-red days. Evaluation results from 2006 indicate a 5% - 7% increase in the number of passengers on a Ride Free day.

Attachment A:

The following agencies offer Free Rides on Code Red days in Northern Virginia:

- Arlington County Transit
- Alexandria County DASH
- City of Fairfax CUE
- Fairfax County Connector
- City of Falls Church GEORGE Bus
- Loudoun County Transit
- Prince William County PRTC Omnibus
- WMATA – Metrobuses that operate in Arlington, Fairfax, and Loudoun counties and the cities of Alexandria, Fairfax, and Falls Church.

The following agencies offer Free Rides on Code Red days in Maryland:

- TransIT Services of Frederick County
- Montgomery County Ride On
- Prince George's County The Bus
- WMATA – Metrobuses that operate in Montgomery and Prince George's Counties.