

Metropolitan Washington Council of  
Governments

Commuter Connections  
Report of Stakeholder Interviews

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# Table of Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Background</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Major Transportation Issues Facing the Region</b> .....	<b>5</b>
Growth.....	5
Maintaining/Enhancing Current Infrastructure.....	6
Funding.....	10
Traffic Congestion.....	10
<b>Why Drive Alone?</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>Seniors</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>Upcoming Construction Projects</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>Characterization of the Region</b> .....	<b>13</b>
Diversity.....	13
Bridging the Gap Between Baltimore and D.C.....	13
Press Coverage of Transportation Issues.....	14
<b>How Agencies are Currently Marketing Services</b> .....	<b>15</b>
<b>Universal Talent of Transportation Professionals in the Region</b> .....	<b>17</b>
<b>Growing Partnerships Outside the Transportation Network</b> .....	<b>18</b>
<b>Coordination of the Professional Network and Regional Services</b> .....	<b>19</b>
<b>Program Evaluation</b> .....	<b>21</b>
<b>Ideas Summary</b> .....	<b>21</b>
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>22</b>

## Executive Summary

The Washington, D.C., Maryland, and Virginia areas are among the fastest growing areas of the country. As some counties incorporate transit oriented development into their plans, others accommodate the creation of huge employment centers in remote areas. The Base Realignment Area Commission (BRAC) will relocate tens of thousands of federal workers from transit-rich urban areas to areas that have no access to public transportation-and barely enough road capacity to accommodate half the anticipated growth in vehicle traffic.

While growth has a negative outcome of increased traffic congestion, it is also a sign of a vital, dynamic community. The counties, cities, and neighborhoods that make up the region each have a character of their own, and residents enjoy a great quality of life whether they want to live in the thriving, transit-rich environment of Arlington or enjoy the beauty and coastal lifestyle of Annapolis. The diversity of the area and the rich array of cultural, educational, dining, and entertainment opportunities—along with the security of the federal government as the primary employer—makes the region an extremely attractive place to live and work, and will continue to attract jobs and residents for years to come.

***While the area faces some of the worst traffic congestion in the country, it also enjoys two key benefits: a committed transit infrastructure and, nearly as important, a highly dedicated group of transportation demand management professionals who work in distinct , manageable-sized geographic areas that know the unique needs, stakeholders, opportunities, and challenges of their territory.*** They are made further effective through the services and support of the Commuter Connections network, which brings diverse areas together with regional services and an opportunity to share ideas, leverage program synergy, and create the most dynamic network of transportation professionals in the country.

This group is being made even stronger through attention to the needs and interests of all its members. As part of its 2006/2007 Marketing Plan, Commuter Connections included a process that allowed the marketing team to interview existing stakeholder members of the network. This report offers the outcome of these interviews; identifies or suggests new ideas or improvements on existing programs, identifies new markets for TDM services and ways to reach them and also features an occasional reminder of the challenges faced as the region continues to grow. It is hoped that the report will help shape future program and marketing development and also open up new lines of communication and opportunity through the Commuter Connections network. While specific ideas for possible incorporation into the 2008 marketing program or overall activities of the network are provided at the end of this report, important points and opportunities are also highlighted throughout the report in ***bold italics*** for emphasis and easy referral.

## Background

The Bus Design Group was hired by Commuter Connections in late 2006 to assist in the following marketing-related activities:

- Learning the wants and needs of the network members, and measuring user and employer response to the campaigns, communications, and events.
- Marketing strategy and planning.
- Elevating the perception of alternatives to driving alone.
- Supporting and strengthening the identity of the Commuter Connections network
- Developing marketing materials and media according to the needs and opportunities identified in interviews with the stakeholder network, which might include: TV and radio commercials, brochures, literature, posters, and printed materials, outdoor advertising, exhibit design and fabrication, website, banner ad, and search engine promotion, interactive video and CDs, and other materials.
- Investigating new media and methods including automated cell phone communications, blogging, and podcasting and applying appropriately.
- Public relations, media relations.
- Event coordination and management.
- Media planning and buying.

The development of a marketing implementation plan that would engage all members of the network required that these groups be part of the development process and have an opportunity to voice their ideas and opinions on marketing transportation services. Speaking to these groups during the development process had two important benefits: the ability to draw from a wide range of ideas and experience for development of an effective program, and, perhaps as important, engaging the groups early on in the development process so they would feel ownership of the marketing theme and campaign and incorporate it into their own marketing efforts.

A discussion guide was crafted for each stakeholder category to obtain insight into their particular area of interest related to transportation. A combination of group and individual interviews were held. Peggy Hetherington of PB Americas coordinated this task and conducted the interviews.

Upon completion of the interviews, the Bus Design team prepared this report, which identifies the key issues raised by the stakeholder groups as well as ideas that can be incorporated into an overall marketing theme and implementation plan. In addition, the team will assist Commuter Connections in keeping the

groups engaged in the project through distribution of the report and follow-up with key stakeholders and presentation of the report findings.

During the period of December 2006 through February 2007, twenty-five interviews were held with transportation organizations throughout the Washington metropolitan region, in northern and southern Virginia, and in the greater Baltimore area. About half were done in-person, which allowed the research team to gain both a familiarity with the transit system, observe the TDM organizations “in action”, and also experience the traffic congestion and the extensive roadway system created by building road after road to accommodate the growth of the region. It also gave the team an understanding of the differences among the various areas, from urban areas in the core to the most rural of areas in coastal southern Virginia. The team was also introduced to some of the most talented, cooperative and knowledgeable transit and transportation demand management professionals in the country.

## **Major Transportation Issues Facing the Region**

### ***Growth***

It is certainly not news that growth is happening in the counties surrounding Washington, D.C. Whether it is a single company building a new headquarters complex on what was once farmland, or a plan to turn entire neighborhoods from relatively suburban areas to full-blown transit oriented development sites. Some municipalities have “no-growth” or “slow growth” policies, while others aggressively pursue growth. Frederick City works to preserve its popular historic area and New Market, an antiquing destination. In Loudoun County, the board approved Route 7 / Sterling—bringing millions of square feet of new office space into the area.

Growth has simply outpaced investment in transportation infrastructure. Now, it is harder to catch up with the growth already in place. While there is generally a spirit of cooperation among the counties, states, municipalities, and transportation organizations, nothing is a “done deal” until the money is in the bank. ***Low cost transportation demand strategies, particularly with the enthusiastic participation of employers, can help many workers find a commute even within this growth period.***

Another issue related to growth is enhancing the service that is already in place to accommodate more riders. Parking is over capacity at many Metro stations and many commuters drive miles out of their way to a station where they know they have a better chance of a space. More rail cars are needed on Metro to accommodate rush hour travelers, and more midday travelers need to be

attracted to use the service during off-peak hours to justify the investment. More buses and tighter headways are needed, and the number of connections that need to be made by commuters trying to make a go of transit need to be minimized with a new look at service boundaries and cooperation among providers.

As BRAC comes to implementation, the sites themselves will attract additional employment area growth as military contractors and other providers of services to federal agencies move closer to the new areas. As part of the last BRAC movement, the Naval Air Systems Command has been moving employees and gaining supporting contractor sites for ten years. Many of these areas including this one do not offer affordable housing opportunities, which will require both longer commutes and the creation of new housing developments, primarily in areas not easily served by transit. Many of the relocating employees are used to using transit to get to work; many may be transit dependent, living in areas where they can live their lives car-free. ***This relocating employee market is pre-disposed to using transit which is a rarity in TDM, and an opportunity that cannot be missed.***

Some political leaders throughout the region view the importance of integrating land use and transportation as a low priority. Few young families are buying expensive town homes downtown—they are moving to the suburbs, where they can raise their families in more traditional neighborhoods with backyards and cul-de-sacs. Placing housing, retail and employment centers close together to build a density that will support transit is an admirable goal, but not if it conflicts with the way that people want to live. ***Non-transit options, such as carpooling and vanpooling, are important to fill in the gaps that transit cannot serve.***

### ***Maintaining /Enhancing Current Infrastructure***

As mentioned above, maintaining and adding to current transit services is crucial in both maintaining existing ridership and supporting any marketing and other activities to attract new riders.

Throughout the region, another important issue is that of connectivity. The lack of a one-seat ride from many newly developed areas drives many commuters to travel alone to work in their automobiles. The quagmire of local jurisdictional issues, political boundaries, funding formulas and concerns, and other factors all contribute to a system that in many cases serves its local population in traveling locally, but can only bring them as far as the city line to catch another bus, to another bus, to a Metro, VRE or MARC station. ***SmartTrip will create a seamless fare structure—but without the seamless service to complete the promise of a stress-free commute to work, many will likely to continue to drive alone.***

In many cases, employment centers are just over the ten minute “standard” for a reasonable walk from a nearby Metro stop to their doorstep. **While some employers provide shuttle service, a great opportunity exists to facilitate more shuttles among developers and individual employers. Shuttles might also be useful at the home end, with new gated communities and town home developments springing up near Metro stations.** It is generally believed that those who can take Metro already do. The challenge is to identify those modes and target groups that could use Metro if certain barriers were removed—home or work access, parking, etc.

**Shuttles represent a significant opportunity for local organizations to support transit operators in encouraging greater use of public transportation.** Through identifying employment sites as candidates for shuttles, working with the employer and local transit operator to determine public options for service (and exploring private options where the public service is not available), and marketing the services on-site, the transportation demand management organizations can continue to build their partnership with transit operators and bring more people into shared ride commute options.

Parking is a problem being experienced throughout D.C., Maryland and northern Virginia as well as, in some areas, southern Virginia. Park and ride lots served by buses are filled to capacity; Metro, MARC and VRE stations, both publicly and privately owned, are also full and disappearing as land is taken for new development. Parking is owned by each of the local jurisdictions, but they cannot restrict who parks in the federally funded lots. This creates local traffic as commuters travel in some cases great distances to find a lot where they will get a space. **Working with churches, shopping areas, and other parking lot owners can be a useful service that TDM organizations can provide both to support carpooling and vanpooling as well as serve as shuttle opportunities to bring commuters to nearby, but not walkable, transit.**

There are many stories of people whose trip by transit would take over two hours, while their drive to work (to fill their free parking space) takes about 45 minutes. Outside the district, cars are seen as much more convenient. In Baltimore, the lack of public transportation (particularly East-West routes and the scarcity of one seat rides) has many people driving alone to work. The unavailability of the Guaranteed Ride Home program outside the nonattainment area is another barrier to getting more Maryland commuters into shared ride commuting such as carpools and vanpools. Funding is being sought by Commuter Connections to correct this inequity and allow for a truly regional program. **Once this regional GRH program is in place, it should be marketed heavily in conjunction with the transportation choices (carpool, vanpool, commuter rail) to bring Maryland-bound commuters into the database and encourage more commuters to stop driving alone to work.**

An unpredictable commute has been shown, in focus group after focus group, to be as stressful as a long commute. Leaving two hours for what should be a half hour commute means either two hours (or more) in traffic—or an hour and a half sitting in a parking lot or coffee shop, when the time could have otherwise been spent at the breakfast table with the kids. ***Promoting the predictability of transit has been a successful strategy for several organizations.***

An unpredictable commute can also cause problems with transit ridership during periods of track work, maintenance problems, or bad weather—but is not nearly as much of an issue as an unpredictable commute by car. ***HOV lanes, where available, are valuable tools used to improve the predictability of the commute and can be further leveraged, in areas with adequate park and ride capacity, for carpools, vanpools and bus service.***

The Commuter Connections Network is generating new transit ridership but often these new riders are lost to parking problems and other access to stations. Montgomery County has good access to the Red Line. But there is no easy way to get to the Metro from Silver Spring except via a crowded bus. ***The variety of issues faced by the different agencies calls for customization of messaging strategies that promote viable transportation options from and within that particular area.***

Funding issues prevent Metro and other operators from providing free fare media to generate trial of services. ***Targeted, neighborhood-by-neighborhood, small scale campaigns have been found to be successful and could be expanded to focus on routes that have sufficient capacity.***

At the other end of the spectrum are rural areas that are far from transit, but who still have commuters who choose to live a rural lifestyle but work in an urban area. One area in southern Virginia has two park and ride lots, one of which is completely packed with carpool and vanpool riders. The closest transit stop is more than one hour away from the county line. Matching riders together, when population density is so low, is a particular challenge.

One agency keeps ridematching information for individuals on index cards—there is that little activity for the service, and almost all of the potential riders are known to the agency. In these areas, MetroChek is an issue as independent owner/operators do not want to bother with the perceived paperwork of collecting the money from a separate organization and the riders' fear of a paper trail in businesses like crabbing and oystering that are wary of any government involvement. These vanpool riders are losing money every month, money that could be quite valuable to a low income household. ***An initiative to simplify the tax-free benefit process for these vanpool operators should be sought to ensure that workers (who in many cases, are already earning a low income)***



**get the full benefit of the tax break—every dollar saved is important to them.**

The issue of owner-operated vanpools is one that could be addressed by standardizing, to a degree, both the marketing and operation of vanpool fleets. While several areas operate their own programs with their own subsidies, vehicle providers, etc., there could be a cost benefit to consolidating some of this effort, particularly in vehicle procurement (if that route is chosen) or through vehicle lease and insurance discounts. Employers are not involved in most of the region's vanpools, representing yet another gap in service to employers that could be added to the menu of services provided. Some areas, such as the Pentagon, have established vanpool fleets. ***New sites to be set up through BRAC and the populating of new office developments could be excellent targets for new, organized vanpool programs, especially when riders can take care of the extensive HOV lane network in the region.***

Bedroom communities in southern Virginia are fast becoming retirement communities, which will have to provide mobility for residents. ***The growth in mobile seniors represents a significant opportunity for transportation demand management strategies applied on a non-traditional basis: ridematching for weekly shopping trips, working with area senior centers to encourage regular shuttles to cultural events, and other opportunities to allow retirees to keep their independence and their rural lifestyle.***

A standard belief is: outside the beltway, you have no choice but to drive. Inside the beltway, public transit is generally within walking distance of your origin and destination. ***In suburban areas outside the beltway that do have available transit (for example, in suburbs with good local bus service that connects to in-county jobs or Metro stations), this “urban myth” that you can’t use transit outside the beltway can be corrected through targeted marketing.***

Areas like Tysons Corner, the second largest business district in the region, are an example of growth untethered by transportation planning. There is plenty of free parking and commuters with incomes that support driving alone. Future construction in the area will surely send many of those commuters home to telework or find other forms of transportation besides driving alone to work. Currently, carpooling and vanpooling form the basis for shared ride commuting to the area. Once transit is available, these commuters are likely to move to the Metro. ***However, the emphasis on mode, expressed by many agencies, should be minimized and instead choices should be transparent—as a region. The Commuter Connections network can focus on trip reduction by any means, and cooperatively pursue opportunities for programs that promote all forms of shared ride transportation.***

A need was expressed by many of those interviewed that regardless of which mode they represented, changing the behavior of people driving alone would take a wide range of efforts: problems solved (trip-chaining before and after work made easier; child drop off and pick up); incentives of just education to save money (through SmarTrip, temporary vanpool subsidies and application of the tax credit); perception (removing the “intimidation” factor of public transportation for those who have never used it before; introducing the public to the new transit, not the transit that they might remember from years past) and others. **By working as a network, each member can bring their own perspective to developing innovative, creative solutions to these issues that both work for the region as a whole and their own individual areas.**

### ***Funding***

It was widely stated that everyone knows that the region needs more money to catch up with the development that has overtaken the area, but no one is willing to identify where to get it. As in most areas of the country, raising taxes is considered political suicide for most of those in power. Several initiatives put forward in Virginia during the last Legislative session to address transportation funding are still being argued. Several of those interviewed said that elected officials, in some cases, have their heads in the sand about what they are dealing with and they are not willing to come up with the money now, but the issue is very likely to implode if nothing is done. The lack of a provision for regional governance was also cited as a problem in both acquisition and obligation of funding throughout the area. **Parochialism is rampant in several areas of the region, and it prevents solutions that serve both residents and workers who contribute to the tax base of individual areas.**

**Many, in fact, identified funding as the single most important issue facing the region.** Several large employers, including National Harbor, Potomac, and Konterra (north), Steeplechase are being developed as commercial/retail centers at the beltway, and they all want transit service. This is in addition to the reverse commute that is growing in the region as BRAC and private employers leave the areas served by transit and move out to the suburbs.

### ***Traffic congestion***

**While many cited funding as the most important transportation issue in the region, gridlock was mentioned even more often.** Of course, the two issues are integrally related, and many noted that there has been no real progress on either front over the past year.

Specific areas were noted as having particularly bad congestion. The “hole in the donut” in Fairfax County (the convergence of three major city and county

roads that crisscross the county) generate more than 200,000 trips per day, and half of those trips are made by commuters. Outside the beltway, decisions are made with the assumption of a transit dependent population. Outside the area, however, any surface transportation policy is based on the use of an automobile as the primary form of travel.

### **Why Drive Alone?**

Commuters still drive alone because they feel like they are in control of time, even when they are sitting in traffic. Many don't like to rely on others, or have to make trips on the way to or from work. They might need to work late on occasion, or use their car during the day for work. Some, as much as we hate to admit it, enjoy the additional time that sitting in traffic gives them to decompress and be alone as they make the transition between work and home. These are not people who are going to be riding the Metro or joining a carpool, ever.

***Proper and pragmatic targeting of markets, spending resources on geographic areas and demographic and psychographic groups who are willing to consider an alternative to driving alone, works well with the network concept. While regional marketing efforts can grow general awareness of options and services, individual efforts by network members can build on these efforts through local marketing and partnerships with organizations that can reach people likely to be receptive to the message.***

The majority of commuters will never share the ride to work. And they don't have to in order for TDM programs to be effective. It has been estimated that a five percent reduction in trips—roughly the effect of a religious holiday on rush hour traffic—will increase travel speeds enough to satisfy most travelers. Many network members are already identifying who this “five percent” might be and targeting them with neighborhood-based marketing and partnerships with organizations. Still others are taking it one commute at a time. ***Improving an individual's quality of life is a rewarding outcome to a day's work, and much of the enthusiasm of the network members comes from knowing that they impact people in a positive way. This could form the basis of a powerful public relations or marketing campaign—that many talented people are working to give YOU a better commute!***

In some parts of the region, employers do not see a problem with traffic congestion. They either accept it as an unavoidable fact of life and bear employees coming in at unpredictable times and in unpredictable moods, or still believe that how an employee gets to work is their own business, not their responsibility of as the employer. Telecommuting is generally viewed more as a work/life balance issue than a congestion relief measure. ***Some politicians and communities do not realize how offering more transportation choices and improving mobility throughout their area can benefit them directly. More education, by locality, is needed to bring this point home.***

Identifying that five percent or so of commuters whose attitudes toward shared ride transportation can be done through analysis of the many Commuter Connections surveys. One network member raised the concept of “marketing to extroverts”—perhaps the social connections possible through transit, carpooling and vanpooling can appeal to this group. Introverts might be attracted by the anonymity of transit alone. The availability of a quiet car on commuter trains, likely unknown by much of the public, could be the final push needed by some who are otherwise wary of strangers and direct interaction with the public.

## **Seniors**

Several network members, particularly those who work in suburban or rural areas, pointed out that the transit system is built around a younger market—long off-peak waits for trains and buses, uncomfortable or nonexistent bus shelters, stairs or terrifyingly high escalators—and is not welcoming to seniors who may lose their ability to drive as they age but not their interest in mobility. Many aging baby boomers are staying in place and will need to be accommodated, in very large numbers. Providing dial a ride service to meet this demand is not economically feasible. ***Travel training for seniors, schedules and “how to ride” information printed in large type and formats that can be understood, and partnerships with senior centers should be sought to further identify and meet the needs of this important market.***

## **Upcoming construction projects**

A number of transit and highway construction projects coming up over the next several years will bring both an increase in traffic congestion and an opportunity for the Commuter Connections network to enhance their range of services and expand their markets. One network member noted that over the next five to ten years the region will be inundated with construction traffic. The work to be done along the Dulles Corridor will impact thousands of airport employees, many of whom are unskilled and will need additional public transportation and/or vanpools to get to work. ***Beginning to build partnerships now with those in charge of concessions and other airport employees will set the stage for larger efforts once construction approaches.***

Public information, combined with information on shared ride services and teleworking, will be critical to any successful public outreach effort that will keep the projects—and the travelers—moving. The work that will impact Tysons Corner will find many commuters and others seeking alternatives to driving into the area, despite the free parking. In addition, the successful mitigation of the construction impact on the traveling public will be necessary to ensure that this important project proceeds smoothly. Additional Metro construction in Fairfax

and projects related to BRAC will also bring opportunities to work with new employers and bring more people into shared ride modes.

## Characterization of the Region

### *Diversity*

The diversity of the Washington/Baltimore region--in people, geography, culture, education, entertainment, sports, restaurants, and myriad other areas is what brings (and keeps) many professionals in the area. Diversity was mentioned more than any other attribute as the characteristic that people liked most about the region.

This diversity is reflected in the large number of transportation choices available in the region. ***The value of the Commuter Connections network in bringing transportation organizations together to share ideas, identify program synergies, and implement regional programs where appropriate to support local efforts is important in managing the transportation demand management efforts in such a diverse region.*** Some areas of the region have all forms of public transportation available, and clusters of employment centers that make shuttles and vanpooling viable options. Other areas are rural—so rural that workers are wary of any government involvement in their work, so they decline a \$110 per month vanpool subsidy in favor of maintaining anonymity.

Residents of Frederick County like the small town feel, the history, the roots that spread deep into the community, and the amenities that are easily accessible. The community spirit of Reston was specifically mentioned, also noting that Reston is a “planned” community with a planned development cap and town center district, which is now being built up with one thousand residential units.

An attractive atmosphere for both small and big business, closeness to airports, and, where available, a wealth of commute choices were also noted in various areas as advantages of the region. Some mention that they go into the District regularly for entertainment; others find that they can get what they need—whether it’s a good meal or a great shopping experience—right in their own hometown. Many people almost never leave their home county, living working and playing in a condensed area that is continuously growing. Add the rural areas (particularly of southern Virginia) to the mix, and there is every type of community—urban, suburban, “exurban”, rural—all under the domain of the Commuter Connections network. The variety of areas to be served requires a knowledgeable local organization that is familiar with the people, needs, and opportunities of each area. ***Regional services provided through the network serve the area well, and can be expanded where necessary to allow the local organizations to best use their resources to serve their local***

**populations. From a messaging standpoint, the diversity and opportunities afforded by the region can also be applied to the transportation choices available to all types of travelers.**

### ***Bridging the Gap Between Baltimore and D.C.***

Every Maryland organization interviewed mentioned that they did not feel that they benefited from the regional marketing done by the Commuter Connections network. Several Maryland organizations combine resources on occasion to increase the reach of their advertising. All network participants have access to the regional database, but only Maryland commuters traveling to worksites inside the nonattainment area may use the Guaranteed Ride Home program. With the cost of such a service proven to be quite low, this service could be provided region-wide (even if under a non-TERM program) without much incremental cost, and all Maryland organizations (those who did not operate their own programs) agreed that the availability of a GRH program would greatly help their efforts in recruiting both employers and commuters into their programs. As noted above, Commuter Connections and Maryland DOT are working to make this service available to these commuters.

Since Commuter Connections regional marketing does not effectively reach into Maryland, the other communications that the network does to Maryland employers can, on occasion, be detrimental to the local organizations. For example, Commuter Connections might conduct a survey of Maryland businesses without informing the local TMA. Newsletters from Commuter Connections will arrive at employer sites, and employers call the TMA to ask who the organization is, and how they differ from what the TMA provides. The counties and TMAs might have their own surveys, newsletters, and direct mail pieces. ***The local groups have developed their own brand; adding a Commuter Connections network logo to local materials, and emphasizing the network members in Commuter Connections materials, could go a long way in minimizing confusion and strengthening the perception of an organized effort to minimize traffic congestion in the Baltimore/Washington area. An agreement on standards for use of logos should be considered by the network to begin this process.***

### ***Press Coverage of Transportation Issues***

Organizations reported various levels of attention from the press, with the highest marks for understanding and covering issues given to local publications and the lowest to the Washington Post. All agreed that there was considerable coverage of the gridlock in the area, and this helped to raise awareness of the problem. Columnists throughout the region might be either generally supportive or hostile, and report accordingly.

The press “dabbles” with solutions, but in-depth coverage of anything but the largest issues is practically non-existent outside the small weekly local papers. Public transportation is often criticized for customer dissatisfaction, though the press is beginning to understand the financial constraints under which the agencies operate and are beginning to focus instead on the legislators who can actually improve the situation on the streets.

Every day there is an article about transportation in the Washington Post. Reporters need to write something that will interest their readers, whether good or bad; high profile stories, such as fare increases, are particularly popular with the press. ***It was suggested that the Commuter Connections network might as a group take an opportunity to educate the press and put issues and potential solutions out to the press in a way that would be both interesting to the public and positive to the agencies. This could attempt to balance the negative coverage that pervades most of the area media.***

HOV lanes are considered to be covered fairly by the press, both for their benefit to the commuter and as good public policy. Smaller organizations reported that local community papers almost always picked up their press releases and were very cooperative in covering events such as new buses, route or schedule changes, etc.

## **How Agencies Are Currently Marketing Services**

As the Commuter Connection network continues to coordinate awareness-building campaigns for regional services such as Guaranteed Ride Home, ridematching, and employer services, each local organization has its own form of outreach that uses the resources they are given in the most efficient manner possible, and reaches out to local employers and commuters. ***The transient nature of the Washington/Baltimore area requires that messages be out in front of the public constantly as people move into the area and seek new forms of commuting.***

A wide variety of locally-oriented marketing strategies are being used by the network participants to make employers and commuters aware of their services and encourage them to use shared ride options, telework and bicycling. Examples include:

- Commercials in movie theaters
- Backlit panels
- Videos featuring services
- Brochures
- Schedule kiosks
- Phone directory advertising
- Direct mail

- Highway advertising
- New resident packets
- Direct sales to employers

Several agencies are changing their marketing message to target people and, in some cases, companies who are becoming more environmentally conscious. ***Promoting the environmental benefits of public transportation, carpools and vanpools will continue to grow in importance as a TDM strategy over the coming years as environmental consciousness continues to take hold.*** Incentives are also used widely to encourage trial. Examples of incentives include free coffee and newspaper (partnering with the local paper and a local market) and gift baskets.

Employer and community events which includes going out and speaking to potential customers directly continues to be a popular strategy for all of the organizations. One organization participates in more than twenty events each year. Leveraging major events, such as Bike to Work Day and the Walk and Ride Campaign, also works for the local groups.

Local radio and television, within their own county, is done to “piggyback” on the Commuter Connection network regional campaigns. There was much discussion in the interviews, however, over how the younger commuters entering the workforce (and developing their commute habits) receive their information. ***Web sites and other forms of internet and other technology are increasingly popular on the local level.*** All organizations have websites, some in both English and Spanish. Even an agency with an annual budget of \$60,000.00 per year maintains a professional website and takes ridematching applications via email. ***Email lists are being developed through registration on the websites to allow for email marketing and viral marketing techniques. Service alerts are now available on iPods and cell phones. Newsletters are distributed via email or a weblink inserted into an email. Network members could share their expertise and, where applicable, content to allow smaller organizations to offer these same services.***

Partnerships with a variety of local organizations has provided great benefits to the local agencies, allowing them to leverage their marketing budgets, produce new customers, and gain credibility through affiliation with other groups. Several of the TMAs are actually housed by or a part of the local chamber of commerce or economic development authorities. This partnership benefits both parties, as chambers and economic development groups can offer a wider range of transportation services and expertise to members and other businesses and TMAs gain access to their members. Inserts are placed in Chamber newsletters highlighting TMA news and services.



One organization partners with the local Easter Seals chapter through the economic development agency to provide travel training for seniors and riders with disabilities. Another organization operates the phone bank for the local bus service, blurring the line between TDM and public transportation and strengthening the partnership between the two agencies. Other groups visit senior centers several times each month to encourage seniors to improve their independence and mobility by using public transportation rather than the more costly and less flexible paratransit programs. These partnerships will become increasingly important in the future as the aging population of the region booms.

Libraries, grocery stores, and other public areas are used as outlets to distribute transit and ridesharing information through kiosks and bulletin boards. Transit operators advertise their service on their own vehicles, placing their logo and phone number on their buses. Packets are provided to Homeowners Associations (HOAs) and targeted to new residents. Displays and posters are also placed in hospitals and malls to keep information in public view.

Employer outreach sponsored by COG under contract with local governments and contractors such as UrbanTrans is bringing employers into workshops to let them know how to implement programs and take the best advantage of the services that are available through the participating network organizations. These organizations are reporting that they are getting follow-ups with new employers from these workshops, and are meeting their employer outreach goals.

Newsletters are also used to engage riders and keep them up to date on public transportation services. Semi-monthly printed newsletters are placed on train seats to keep riders informed. Transit operators report that they are “constantly communicating” with their riders. ***Once SmarTrip fare programs are in place, each participating operator plans to approach employers to heavily promote the program. A standardized message and materials will help explain the program simply and encourage more employers to use SmarTrip.***

## **Universal Talent of Transportation Professionals in the Region**

The Commuter Connections network benefits from individuals who are talented, creative, dedicated, and motivated. They develop extensive local focus programs on small budgets. The larger programs use technology in ways that other areas of the country are just beginning to consider. Each transit operator interviewed for this project showed pride in their work and a dedication to their community; they know that they provide a vital service to their residents, many of whom have other means of transportation. While they advertise to people who do have access to automobiles, it is the people who depend on them that drive

them to keep providing excellent and continuously improving service, usually under challenging financial constraints.

A variety of attributes were noted by participants for what they like about their job. This, of course, depended on their function: planners enjoyed the macro-level exercise of developing systems (and the fraternity of planners in the Washington region); grants administrators enjoyed overseeing multiple programs and ensuring efficient use of money; and a participant with elderly parents enjoyed the opportunity to help other seniors get where they needed to go.

Others enjoyed the variety of the job, and the empowerment they were given by their funders to try creative new programs and initiatives. The opportunity to connect with other transportation professionals, as well as business people, elected officials, developers and riders was also cited as a benefit.

Those who worked in small cities enjoyed the lack of bureaucracy and the ability to work independently and creatively, often in implementing technical solutions to information and other issues.

Helping customers every day and solving technical challenges is also enjoyed by members of the network. TMAs and TDM groups liked the multi-modal nature of their work, and enjoyed working with transit operators.

While all recognized the enormity of the task of relieving traffic congestion, all acknowledged the value of helping commuters one at a time and firmly believed in the “product” that they are promoting—a better commute.

### **Growing Partnerships Outside the Transportation Network**

While partnerships among network members are considered valuable, it might also be valuable for the network itself to reach out to regional organizations, on a project or permanent basis, to help address issues that will impact the Washington/Baltimore area in the coming year. Senior organizations could lend support and provide ideas on how best to serve this fast-growing market. Hispanic associations and groups representing other ethnic groups could provide access to members and help distribute and target materials that will resonate with their members. Involving small business organizations, or even regional chambers of commerce, could provide a similar benefit.

***While these efforts have been tried by Commuter Connections staff and network members in the past, the growing importance of transportation, whether as a traffic congestion; economic / class; or environmental issue, may have created a more welcoming atmosphere for growing partnerships and could warrant a new look.***

## Upcoming Marketing and Market Opportunities

It was stated by several participants that as a whole, the business community is underserved. Employers in many areas do not see the commute as a challenge, although this realization is likely to become unavoidable quite quickly. Network members can be ready with services such as design and coordination of shuttle services, working with public operators to provide direct service when feasible or developing a network of potential private operators who can serve the employer market and provide a link between the transit stop and the workplace.

Throughout the region, a direct one-seat ride is needed to MARC, Metro, and VRE stations. Most parking lots are beyond capacity—some lots are even being removed as private developers take back the land to build more office or residential space.

Off peak service to encourage use of public transportation and even one-time carpooling for entertainment events (to be made available in the new software system) is an opportunity that could bring new regular riders into the system. Jurisdictional issues that prevent buses from crossing county lines should be addressed to provide a truly seamless transportation network, one that fits the spirit of the SmarTrip fare system. Now, each local operator has its own jurisdiction; planning districts, transit commissions, and agencies all have a say in how the systems will run, complicating any opportunity for change.

An overall increase in customer focus, developed through education of legislative funders by the talented and dedicated transportation professionals who work in the field every day, will steer decisions away from being based on operations and funding and instead focus on what is right for the customer.

***The current transit system and information delivery system could be designed to meet the needs of the elderly, who could be using the system when they stop driving.*** Localities are beginning to make it easier for the elderly to continue to drive, with larger print on signs, brighter pavement markings, and better lighting to make night driving easier. But public transportation is not changing the way it works to encourage older people to use it, as can be seen in unprotected bus shelters, staircases, and the dreaded schedule. The elderly need stimulation and want to have the mobility to get around on their own; public transportation and carpools can provide this. The elderly travel to shopping, entertainment, friends' homes and existing routes are simply not based on where they want to go.

One participant believed that TDM was set up as a social service for areas without the density to support bus service. While the states provide highways, they have an obligation as well to provide for those who do not drive.

## Coordination of the Professional Network and Regional Services

All participants were asked to describe the function of Commuter Connections. Responses varied; various participants said it was:

- our collective group to provide a database of ridematching services
- a clearinghouse—venue for various organizations to come, meet, talk
- a provider of the ridematching and Guaranteed Ride Home programs
- a source of money and advocacy for improvements
- an educational tool for employers and commuters on the benefits of transportation delivery programs and alternatives
- strategic planning
- the ridesharing community
- regional marketing
- rideshare radio ads, billboard ads, mailings—employer specific larger ad efforts out of our range
- a central ridematching database
- Clean Air Partners, Bike to Work Day, Wellness Event, Elder Services
- a source of information: Park and ride lots, HOV lanes; if we cannot answer a question, send them to Commuter Connections staff
- a source of collateral
- reports and surveys
- a marketing agent to generate calls for locals
- a resource for new residents who aren't familiar with the area

***Virtually all participants acknowledged the value of a single entity coordinating regional services such as Guaranteed Ride Home, regional marketing, and ridematching.*** Hopes are very high for an online interface for ridematching; many participants expressed frustration that it has taken this long for it to be available.

Several participants suggested additional services that the Commuter Connections network could provide for them, including funding for limited local marketing efforts; certificate training in TDM; customer service training (many noted the excellence of the call center at Commuter Connections, as well as technical support for the ridematching system);

## Program Evaluation

The Commuter Connections network was thought by some to take too much credit for locals' results, while others believed that COG was unfairly "beat up" based on the lack of results from some of the local network participants. ***It was widely believed that the local organizations had to take responsibility for meeting their own goals—and that they should also show their local elected officials and funding organizations the results of their programs and how each elected official's jurisdiction benefited from the area's transit investment.***

A wealth of information is collected by each program to both measure its own success and contribute to the conformity and overall performance of Commuter Connections network TERM programs. Surveys and extensive reports are generated by the network members and fed into Commuter Connections reports. Annual surveys, traffic counts, and intersection counts are done by the counties and cities to back up this information.

Just a handful of participants felt that the Commuter Connections network would not need to be created if it didn't already exist. Most felt that the regional services were very important to enhance their local efforts. Several noted that the network needed to do more with technology, putting aside turf issues and working more cooperatively on a regional level. ***Many noted that relationships between network participants and Commuter Connections staff were improving, but felt that continued interest in and recognition of local efforts, as well as improvements in ridematching and web technology, were critical to the network's future success.***

Participants realize that Commuter Connections staff feels accountable for the results of all the programs, which sometimes leads to the micromanagement of local programs. The participants noted, however, that if they do not work hard and do a good job, the entire program will fall apart. A "defensive mode" is sometimes generated by Commuter Connections staff, but all members of the network have the same goal which is to increase the number of riders in carpools, vanpools, trains, buses, bicycling, walking, and teleworking. Some network members feel that they need greater empowerment to pursue projects without micromanagement in order to generate the greatest results.

## **Ideas Summary**

Both through the interviews themselves and later analysis of the transcripts, a number of program, service, and administrative ideas were generated. Some ideas focused on opportunities for increased cooperation and coordination with the network; others were program ideas that could benefit from the talent of the network working together. Some ideas were less positive about the network, but offered suggestions for improvements that could make it more effective. These ideas are listed below.

- Build individual electronic email databases for each local network member by sorting the information in the new regional database, to allow email follow-up; an opt-in email service might be added to the registration page so people who wished to could get updates on local transportation services.
- Commuter Connections Call Center staff should turn local questions over to the local network members who best know the local roads.
- Enhance the employer outreach capabilities of the local network members themselves, either through hiring or training.
- Allow the network to have more input on the planning for the Transportation Emission Reduction Measures; in particular, provide more opportunities for the local agencies to market the programs in part locally.
- Broaden the products and services advertised through the Guaranteed Ride Home budget; the advertising program is not constrained to focus just on GRH.
- Build the network as a team; all members have a common goal to help society and share common interests.
- Include the funding agencies in spending decisions and program creation, rather than focusing solely on the TPB. This will elevate the positions of the local jurisdictions and result in greater overall cooperation.
- Include all of the funding organizations—DDOT, VDOT, MDOT, and VDRPT in discussions of major issues to improve the working relationship among the agencies; this will make the job of Commuter Connections staff much easier.
- Engage all network members in decisions and give them a voice at committee meetings; this will empower them to be greater contributors to the network and generate greater cooperation and coordination for all programs.
- Create “templates” of information that can be customized by the local organizations, still with the Commuter Connections network logo but ultimately more familiar to their intended audience.
- Continue to emphasize the network of organizations involved in Commuter Connections; Commuter Connections and COG can still take credit for the program results, but it makes them look even stronger if they are helping the local organizations complete their tasks and meet their goals through the network.
- Provide a regular report to network members of people who contact Commuter Connections’ Operations Center for information.
- Use webinars, teleconferences, and scheduling of meetings on the same day to encourage greater participation of members.
- Let the local network members do what they do best—work locally; Commuter Connections / COG should still monitor results and report on them, but the states should tell the local organizations what to do.

- COG Board should avoid setting goals for the local network members; for example, the 20 percent goal in two years for telework, when the current percentage was twelve percent; these are decisions that the states that fund the programs should make with the local agencies.

## **Conclusion**

The Washington/Baltimore area is a dynamic, vibrant, and rapidly growing area that benefits from an excellent transit system in some areas, but a severe lack of transit or transit coordination in others. As the region continues to grow further out from the District and existing transit infrastructure, it will be critical for the DOTs of the District, Maryland, Virginia; VDRPT, COG, TPB, each county, each city and employment center, developers, transit operators, and TDM organizations and TMAs to work together to ensure that the growth of the area enhances its vitality and does not bring it to a screeching halt.

The Commuter Connections network, with its existing cooperative relationships among talented and dedicated professionals from all of these organizations, can play an important role in keeping the region on track toward its goals and together help guide the responsible legislative bodies to properly fund what will need to be a greatly expanded transportation system.

*This report was compiled from in-person and telephone interviews with 25 members of the Commuter Connections network in December 2006 and January 2007. The consulting team thanks the network members and the Commuter Connections staff for their assistance and cooperation with the interview process.*