

"Federation Corner" column
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New schedule cuts MARC train service

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On December 1, the Maryland Transit Administration announced a new MARC Brunswick Line train schedule, effective January 30. The new schedule will significantly worsen MARC train service in Montgomery County and hinder plans to reduce traffic.

The MARC train provides an important transportation option in Montgomery County. State-owned MARC train service runs between D.C., Brunswick, Martinsburg, and Frederick. The track is mostly owned by the freight railroad CSX. Service is one-way (mornings toward D.C., evenings away from D.C.), during weekday commuting hours only.

Montgomery County has 11 MARC train stations, extending in a northwesterly line from Silver Spring via Kensington and Garrett Park into Rockville, the Gaithersburg area, Germantown, and the Agricultural Reserve. MARC connects with Metro at Rockville, Silver Spring, and Union Station. Not only does MARC help Montgomery County residents reach jobs in the county and D.C., it also helps Frederick County, Virginia, and West Virginia residents reach jobs in Montgomery County, particularly in Gaithersburg, Rockville, Kensington, and Silver Spring.

So what does MARC's new schedule do? In summary, it cuts service to 8 Montgomery County stations in order to get trains to and from Brunswick and Martinsburg faster.

Gaithersburg, a big station, loses 1 of 8 evening trains, resulting in an hour-long gap between trains. Metropolitan Grove, another big station, loses 3 of 17 trains. Kensington loses 2 of 13 trains, resulting in hour-long gaps. Garrett Park loses 2 of 6 evening trains, resulting in an 1½-hour gap. Barnesville loses 1 of 6 morning trains, resulting in an hour-long gap. Boyds and Dickerson get 1½-hour gaps. Washington Grove gets 1 more morning train but also an hour-long evening gap.

In addition, the schedule cuts service for the increasing number of non-county residents who commute by train to jobs in Montgomery County. At Metropolitan Grove, the first train from Brunswick will arrive over an hour later, and the last train to Frederick will leave over an hour earlier. Gaithersburg gets a 1½-hour gap between trains to Brunswick. And Kensington gets a gap of over 2 hours in the morning for trains from Brunswick, and 1½ hours in the evening.

All of these service cuts will reduce ridership. The MARC train is a realistic transportation option only if it provides service where and when people need it. Cutting service and increasing the time between trains makes it harder for people to be able to choose the train. Inevitably, some current riders will drive instead, while people thinking about MARC will just continue driving.

The schedule also adds to congestion on I-270. MARC train service to Frederick provides an option for Frederick residents to reach jobs in Montgomery County and D.C. without driving on I-270. But the new schedule makes MARC travel from Frederick less attractive, lengthening the trip to Frederick in order to shorten the trip to Brunswick.

Further, the schedule hinders Montgomery County's efforts to reduce traffic and encourage transit-oriented development. In the Rockville area and west, the MARC train provides a direct rail link to downtown Silver Spring. The Clarksburg Master Plan calls for the Boyds MARC station to serve as Clarksburg's transit hub

until the Corridor Cities Transitway (CCT) is built. The Dickerson MARC station is directly next to MD-28, a major highway for commuters from Frederick County. And new housing is already under construction across the street from the MARC station in Old Town Gaithersburg, and next to the MARC station at Metropolitan Grove.

Future plans include MARC connections with the CCT at Metropolitan Grove, the Purple Line at Silver Spring, and transportation corridors in the county's developing plan for a bus rapid transit system. The White Flint Sector Plan calls for a 12th county MARC station. The Great Seneca Science Corridor Master Plan relies on the future MARC-CCT connection to help transport people to the planned 60,000 jobs at Science City. And the Kensington Sector Plan currently under development is based in part on improved MARC service.

Finally, the new schedule is unlikely to accomplish MARC's stated aim of reducing delays. Major causes of delays include CSX operations (track work, switch and signal problems, freight congestion), train maintenance, and the weather. Adjusting the schedule will not fix these problems.

Ultimately, the real problem is MARC's limited service. MARC actually has a plan for expansion, known as the MARC Growth and Investment Plan. This would eventually allow the train to run all day, in both directions between D.C., Brunswick, and Frederick, on weekdays and weekends. Obviously, this would make the MARC train a realistic transportation choice for many more Montgomery County residents. But unfortunately, there is as yet no funding for this plan.

Meanwhile, however, any schedule revisions must, at minimum, maintain current levels of service for all riders. MARC should provide transportation options for everybody along the Brunswick Line, not just the people who live furthest away. Montgomery County residents and government must insist that the Maryland Transit Administration withdraw the new schedule.

Citizens can provide comments on the new schedule by e-mailing marc@mta.maryland.gov, with copies to their elected representatives, or by attending a MARC-sponsored public meeting to be held at the Town Hall in Kensington on Thursday, January 5, 2012, from 4 pm to 7 pm.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to theelms518@earthlink.net