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[Prince George's County](#)
[Carroll County](#)

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by **Amy Limbert**
 Staff Writer

Mar. 5, 2004

**Businesses
seek remedies
for gridlock
madness**

Commuters in the Washington, D.C., area know their daily battles with clogged roadways exact a toll -- on their time, on their car, and perhaps most of all on their sanity.

But it's not just employees who are struggling to cope.

Businesses, too, are grappling with gridlock. Executives say it affects where they open new offices; sometimes the most cost-effective location isn't the most accessible.

Long, frustrating commutes can hurt productivity. Plus, the region's increasing congestion has an impact on recruiting and retaining workers, executives say, forcing them to develop strategies to ease the burden.

A long commute can mean quick employee turnover, said Richard N. Parsons, president of the Montgomery County Chamber of Commerce.

"There's a 45-minute window for the commute, and outside that, a huge percentage leave within six months or less," Parsons said.

A reasonable commute is moving to the top of prospective employees' list of criteria in taking a new job, said Hunter R. Hollar, CEO of Sandy Spring Bank of Olney.

"The first thing on their list is not the work space or office size. The first thing is how it affects the commute," Hollar said.

In response, the bank, which employs more than 600, is relocating some employees to a new office in Columbia.

David McClatchy, senior vice president at Scheer Partners Inc. in Rockville, said his company opened an office in Greenbelt three years ago specifically

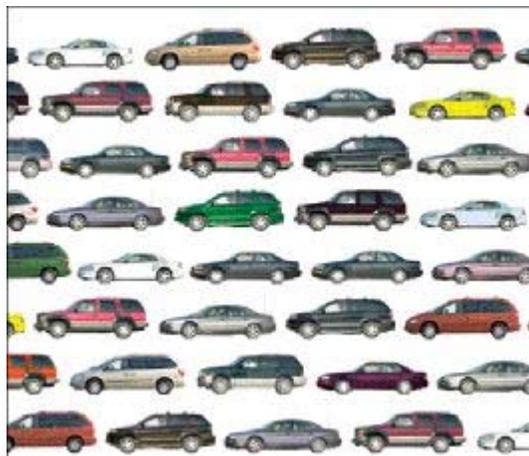


Photo illustration by Dan Gross/The Gazette

to help employees avoid the gridlock in the Rockville area. He said recruitment efforts are sometimes complicated by traffic.

"With respect to our business, we certainly want to know where employees live and how they will get to work," McClatchy said.

He said that his company always looks for the best-qualified employees in the region but sometimes concentrates its efforts in certain areas.

"Most employers like to see people within a half-hour of the office," McClatchy said.

That may be an ambitious goal, a recent Census survey indicates.

Based on 2002 data from the Census Bureau's American Community Survey, the average commute for Prince George's County residents is 34.6 minutes -- the sixth-longest in the nation.

The average Montgomery County commuter spent a little less time on the road, driving 30.9 minutes each way, 16th in the nation.

Other Marylanders tended to have slightly shorter commutes, according to the survey: Anne Arundel County's residents averaged 29 minutes each way, Howard County's 28.8 minutes, and Baltimore County's 27.1 minutes.

The data shows little change from 2000, the only other year the Census Bureau reported commuting times.

Thomas D. Murphy, executive vice president of EagleBank in Bethesda, said that for some employees, getting to work on time is a "constant problem." It's so bad that the company is moving an operations center from Bethesda to Silver Spring.

"We're moving 40 employees from Bethesda to Tech Road in Silver Spring to get away from downtown Bethesda traffic," he said. "Lots of our workers commute from Laurel and elsewhere in Prince George's County."

The region's plugged highways are forcing businesses to abandon the 9-to-5 regimen for employees.

Linda Olin-Weiss, director of staffing services for Lockheed Martin in Bethesda, said that when a company, such as hers, employs about 13,000 in the Washington area, flexibility is key.

"Flex-time policies are critical to addressing this," Olin-Weiss said.

De'Ann Farmer, manager of talent sourcing at Lockheed Martin, is a veteran of the region's rush-hour wars.

Farmer has been commuting more than an hour -- from Anne Arundel or Prince George's counties to Montgomery -- every workday for more than 20 years. She said the company's flexibility has been key to her career.

The long commute and its occasional headaches are worth it, Farmer said, so she can live closer to her family and enjoy a lower cost of living while working a job she loves.

Still, several times a month, she endures traffic jams that lengthen her commute to two hours or more. She copes by listening to the radio and talking on her cell phone.

"I think because I've always done it, it's been acceptable to me," Farmer said. "If I'd ever had a five-minute commute, I probably wouldn't be able" to

handle the longer commute.

It's a good thing Farmer is hardened to the commute. She says traffic has gotten much worse in the past 20 years, and she doesn't foresee an improvement.

"There is no easy window," she said. "Rush hour has gotten much longer. In the morning it is longer, and in the evening there is no way to gauge it. I'm cringing at what it could be like five years from now."

Hollar said traffic headaches are a part of daily life for many of his employees at Sandy Spring Bank.

"What I see employees go through, especially younger employees, is that they are moving farther and farther out for affordable housing in Frederick and Carroll counties," Hollar said. "Keep in mind our headquarters is in Olney. Traffic becomes an issue for them."

In bad weather, Hollar said, employees want to come in late or close the office early, and many have trouble getting to work even on a normal workday -- especially those who drive south on Interstate 270 every morning.

One possible solution is technology. Hollar said Sandy Spring Bank allows telecommuting to a limited degree.

"We haven't had a big program out of it, but we have utilized days here and there to combat the traffic problem," he said.

Traffic guides business decisions in other ways, too. For example, Hollar said, it's a factor in deciding where to open a bank branch. Sandy Spring has locations in Montgomery, Frederick, Howard and Anne Arundel counties, as well as one in Laurel.

"We want the branch in a site where the traffic flow is convenient to get out of the traffic and into our office," he said. "But if getting to and from the branch is impossible with the traffic, what could appear to be a good location is actually a poor location."

A region out of whack

Stewart Schwartz, executive director of the Coalition for Smarter Growth in Washington, said the region's strained transportation system results in severe job and housing imbalances, which in turn can exacerbate traffic woes.

"We need more jobs down county, in southeast Montgomery County, and more housing in the 270 corridor," Schwartz said. "This would ease traffic by encouraging more east-west travel."

Schwartz said jobs and housing are especially mismatched between Montgomery and Prince George's counties.

"Prince George's people have some of the largest, longest commutes to Montgomery County," he said.

Many political and business leaders say the proposed Intercounty Connector, which would link the Interstate 270 and Interstate 95/Route 1 corridors, will alleviate traffic immensely.

"We need more capacity on the roads and the ICC is the biggest, most effective project out there," Parsons said.

EagleBank's Murphy said building the ICC -- plus adding the proposed inner Purple Line to the Metrorail system, linking Bethesda and New Carrollton -- would help ease the traffic crunch.

"Coming into Bethesda down 270 or from the Beltway is horrendous," he said. "My hope is that the ICC will take traffic off this part of the Beltway."

The ICC and Purple Line are years away. In the meantime, Murphy said EagleBank, like many other Montgomery County businesses, encourages employees to use Metrorail and other mass transit options. The company reimburses employees for mass transit tickets, he said. Between 20 and 30 of EagleBank's more than 100 employees use mass transit regularly, with the bank paying about \$1,500 per month in public transit reimbursement. EagleBank has six branches in Montgomery County and two in Washington.

Stop sprawl, ease traffic

The long-term solution lies in exploiting mass transit, not building more highways, Schwartz said.

"The business community for a number of years has complained that traffic costs time and money and alters the way they do business," he said. "They argue for road expansions, especially larger roads and bypasses, such as the ICC."

But the business community is actually contributing to the region's traffic problem by scattering office and residential developments, Schwartz said.

"If you look at Montgomery County, you'll see most major employers didn't locate at the Red Line, but at what I call 'trophy locations' along I-270," Schwartz said. "And they're not even in some sort of center where people can carpool."

He said that if businesses would cluster around Metro stations, employees would be more likely to use public transportation. In Prince George's County, he said, 13 Metro stations are devoid of surrounding commercial development. In Montgomery County, Silver Spring and Bethesda have the most commercial development near Metro stations.

Schwartz points to Arlington, Va., as an example of how such Metro-centric development can keep employees off the highway.

According to a study by his coalition, 41 percent of workers in Arlington use mass transit, and 73 percent of Metro users in the Rosslyn-to-Ballston corridor -- which includes Arlington -- walk to Metro, while most of the rest ride buses to the Metro stops, Schwartz said.

According to Census data, in 2002 about 18 percent of Prince George's County commuters used public transportation, while 15 percent of Montgomery County commuters did.

Montgomery County established a program requiring businesses with at least 25 employees in the county's most congested areas to submit plans for easing traffic jams, such as offering incentives for workers to use mass transit.

Although Metro doesn't extend into Frederick County, MARC commuter trains do run there, and smarter development would help the county avoid the kind of gridlock that's already creeping northward from Montgomery County, he said.

"As Frederick scatters, they will face the same problems as Montgomery County," he said. "In Frederick, the more you can concentrate jobs downtown, in centers and near the MARC, the better."

Still, some traffic problems will probably always go with the territory, said Parsons of the Montgomery chamber, who warned that a quick fix is not in sight.

"We have to be careful about expectations," Parsons said. "There is no metropolitan area without congestion."

[Return to top](#)

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