



Wiehle Metro Station Access: Congestion Ahead





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Reston Citizens Association

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Reston is in line for a difficult period when Metrorail arrives and we are the end of the line.

Projections by the excellent RMAG study in 2008 indicated that there will be considerable congestion around the station. Those projections are probably optimistic since they assumed completion of the line to Loudoun. Instead, commuters from Loudoun, Western Fairfax County and Herndon as well as Reston residents will be trying to get to the station.

Somewhat per the RMAG recommendations, Fairfax County has not made Wiehle station readily accessible by auto to all who might want to drive there. Some important improvements are being made around the station, in part in conjunction with the COMSTOCK project, and the station will have a substantial garage. However, several important projects recommended by RMAG have not been built and are unlikely to be completed during the period the Wiehle station is the end of the line. This includes the Soapstone Drive extension, including its bridge across the Dulles Toll Road, as well as the recommended grid of streets around the station and an exclusive bus lane.

One particular problem is the lack of easy access on the south side of the station. Although pedestrians from south Reston, as well as bus passengers from the west, can access the southern entrance, autos and bus passengers from south Reston will have more difficulty, since the adjacent area is privately owned. Only a major public policy initiative to enlist private cooperation could change this and make easy access from the south a reality.

We believe the County should try to encourage bus ridership rather than auto access to the station. Present arrangements for bus access mean that most bus passengers will be bogged down in the same traffic as their auto-borne compatriots. Fairfax County is currently working on bus route and schedule changes that need to be carefully reviewed by Reston riders. Bus links to the Town Center deserve further review and consideration. The County needs to ensure that bus service is efficient, attractive and speedy. The report makes several recommendations to encourage this.

We also think parking rates at the Wiehle garage and bus fares from the Herndon Monroe garage and the South Reston Park and Ride should be further evaluated to encourage bus ridership.

Improvements are being made in the immediate station area to improve pedestrian access. But some projects will not be completed till long after the station opens and other

needs, such as pedestrian safety, are not fully met. Bike access is more problematic since key connections like the Soapstone crossing and bike paths have not been built.

We think that there will be many unanticipated problems when the station opens. We think the County should designate one person to coordinate problem-solving among the myriad of organizations involved—including MWAA, WMATA, VDOT, and FC DOT. This person would also serve as an important communicator with the public during this period.

A summary of the recommendations in this report follows.

- **Recommendation #1:** That the forthcoming revised Reston Master Plan encourage the property owners south of the station to improve pedestrian, bus and auto access *to the* station in the near term.
- **Recommendation #2:** That RA and RCA form a joint sub-committee, perhaps based on the RA Transportation Advisory Committee and including actual bus riders, to review and comment on the details of the proposed bus service.
- **Recommendation # 3:** That where possible the County utilize bus access routes to the station such as the Dulles Toll Road and Sunset Hills.
- **Recommendation #4:** That VDOT review the prohibition of left turns for buses at the Wiehle station Dulles Toll Road bus ramps
- **Recommendation # 5:** That MWAA consider bus only lanes on the shoulders of the Dulles Toll Road between Wiehle Avenue and the Herndon Monroe garage.
- **Recommendation # 6:** That the Reston Town Center Association review and comment on the adequacy of proposed bus service between the Wiehle station and Town Center.
- **Recommendation # 7:** That Fairfax County enter into discussions with Vornado and the owners of Isaac Newton Square regarding the establishment of better **bus-only** access to the Wiehle station.
- **Recommendation # 8:** That Fairfax County establish a program to encourage alternatives to single occupant vehicle trips to the Wiehle Station.
- **Recommendation # 9:** That the Reston Association Pedestrian and Bicycling Advisory Committee review ongoing projects to help ensure their completion before the station opens and recommend any urgent additional measures needed.
- **Recommendation # 10:** That Supervisor Hudgins publicize the Residential Permit Parking District program and provide instructions for Restonians to request its implementation.
- **Recommendation # 11:** That Supervisor Hudgins work with related agencies to designate a coordinator for Wiehle station issues.

BACKGROUND

In December 2013 or January 2014, the first Silver Line Metro train will be leaving the Wiehle station with paying passengers. This is a long-awaited event that will link Reston to the rest of the Washington area via Metro. In 2008, a dedicated group of Reston residents and County officials completed the Wiehle Avenue/Reston Parkway Station Access Management Plans Final Report (RMAG for short). This quality 150 page study, supported by excellent county contractors, sought to provide a detailed analysis of transportation-related improvements needed to support access to the stations.

In the fall of 2012, with the Metro opening only a little over one year away, it seemed appropriate to reexamine this report to determine whether and how its ambitious recommendations had been carried out. What will Reston residents and others find when they try to use the Wiehle station? How will Reston fare with being the end of the Silver Line until at least 2017? We sought out knowledgeable local observers, property owners near the station and County officials, and also reviewed relevant reports to assess the situation.

DEMAND

An effort to determine anew the demand for the new station was beyond the scope of this report. Instead, we relied on data generated for the RMAG report, as modified by our understanding of the current local situation. The Silver Line plans to run trains every six to seven minutes during rush hours and less frequently during other periods. In this situation, the RMAG report stated that “some level of vehicular congestion in the area is unavoidable”. In particular, it said the access routes to the station “will not be able to accommodate all of the unconstrained peak hour’s demand.”

Even more troubling, the report said that even after significant infrastructure improvements were made near the station “the areas immediately surrounding (it) will experience heavy congestion during peak periods.” At one point RMAG said that only 60% of the peak AM demand and 43% of the peak PM demand could be met. The traffic that cannot be accommodated would have to either:

- Use other routes to get through Reston.
- Shift to earlier or later commuting times.
- Walk or bike.

The bad news is that, in hindsight, these are probably optimistic predictions. The RMAG study was looking forward to 2030 when Wiehle will not be the end of the line. Once the Silver Line is completed to Loudoun County, Wiehle will just be an intermediate stop. Until then, all Metro bound traffic to or from Western Fairfax, Dulles and Loudoun will have to use the Wiehle station. Already there are plans to reroute buses, which currently go to West Falls Church or elsewhere, to Wiehle.

Perhaps more troubling is that the projects that RMAG branded as most essential have not been undertaken. The most important is the so-called Soapstone Drive extension from Sunrise Valley Drive across the Dulles Toll Road (DTR) to Sunset Hills Road. The report said that the project that would have “the greatest impact” on congestion would be the completion of the Soapstone Bridge across the Dulles Toll Road (DTR). Another RMAG recommendation called for dedicated bus lanes on Sunset Hills Road to provide a bus-only route to the station.

RMAG also called for a grid of streets around the station to enable traffic to bypass the already congested Sunset Hills/Wiehle intersection. Although COMSTOCK is undertaking some important road construction at the station, the grid of streets now exists only as a theoretical construct in the ongoing Reston planning process.

It is unlikely that these projects will be completed in the years that Wiehle is the end of the line, and some may never be undertaken because of the land acquisition cost or the need for private redevelopment first.

Although we expect heavy traffic to the station—probably heavier than even RMAG anticipated in 2030—there are some countervailing factors. One is the relatively high vacancy rate in commercial buildings in Reston—now above 16%.

Another is that anticipated development in Reston has not yet occurred, and given the current market may not even occur in the next five years. The current Reston master planning effort recently released projections that the Wiehle station TOD area could have as many as 13,000 additional jobs and 5,500 new residential households by 2030-2040. However, the current proposal for the Bozzuto project next to that station (calling for about 420 residential units and 640 parking spaces) is perhaps more indicative of what development could occur in the near term.

On the other hand, the projected doubling in DTR tolls by 2015 may push more people to use Metro and may also drive more traffic onto local streets in order to avoid the DTR.

IMMEDIATE ACCESS TO THE STATION

Important work to improve access to the station is going on in conjunction with the COMSTOCK multi-use project. COMSTOCK is constructing a “Reston Station Boulevard” on the north side of the station. This will connect with “Metro Center Drive” (formerly known as “the road to Kaiser Permanente”) that will provide station access directly from and to Sunset Hills Road. This will be an important access point allowing some traffic to avoid the congested Sunset Hills/Wiehle intersection and the Wiehle Avenue Bridge across the DTR.

COMSTOCK and Fairfax County are also undertaking a series of intersection and access lane improvements near the station that will help traffic flow. For example, there will be additional left turn lanes at the main entrance to the station on Wiehle as well as at the entrance to Metro Center Drive off Sunset Hills Road.

South side: A major issue, however, will be the lack of adequate access to the station from the South side of the DTR. This area is connected to the station by what some have called

“the escalators to nowhere.” In addition to the escalators, a pedestrian bridge already constructed across the toll road will convey passengers into the station.

However, access from south Reston to this area will be very difficult if not impossible by auto and bus. Five bus bays are being provided along the Dulles Toll Road eastbound exit, but they will not be easily accessible to automobiles from south Reston (see later discussion related to these ramps). They are primarily designed to handle buses from Loudoun and Dulles Airport.

- Pedestrians from the Sunrise Valley area will be able to access the south entrance but only by approaching it from Wiehle Avenue.
- There is no provision for parking and no current plan for “kiss and ride” drop off on the south side of the station.

The result will be that most motorized traffic from south Reston will have to cross the Wiehle DTR Bridge to gain access to the station. The bridge itself is an important access point to the DTR with two major left turns. Traffic coming to the station from the south will also have to make a left turn there as well. Pedestrians, particularly from the southwest of the station, will have a long trek around Commerce Park.

The reason for this is that the area immediately adjacent to the south entrance of the station is controlled by private owners who have no immediate plans to provide public access. Vornado, a Real Estate Investment Trust, owns the three relatively new buildings and garage abutting the south entrance but ownership of the entire “Commerce Park block” is complicated by the presence of several other owners. We were told an Association of the owners maintains control of the grounds and access routes. It plans a much more aggressive no parking program and has no plans for bus or vehicle access to the station access bridge. We were told Association members are very nervous about the legal and other implications of public access.

In one of the more ironic developments, the county has earmarked funds for a pedestrian pathway through the property. This was one of the recommendations in the RMAG report. However, the County has had no discussion with the property owner about implementing it!

Vornado is open to eventual redevelopment of the property that will improve access but currently has no plans to undertake such action.

In its report, the Wiehle area sub-committee of the Reston Master Planning Task Force anticipated this situation, and has urged Fairfax County to take action now to encourage the private owners to improve station access sooner. The planning process anticipates substantially more density in this area. The Wiehle subcommittee proposed that the owners get a bonus but only if they cooperate sooner on the access issue.

Recommendation #1: That the forthcoming revised Reston Master Plan encourage the property owners south of the station to improve pedestrian, bus and auto access to the station in the near term. (A more dramatic recommendation for this area appears later in the paper.)

BUS SERVICE

As noted earlier in this report, the RMAG study and related planning did not anticipate that Wiehle would become a station primarily accessed by auto. Among other things, it is simply unrealistic to significantly expand the access roads to the station--Wiehle and Sunrise Valley Drive in particular. Although the station will contain a 2,300 car public garage, observers think this will be filled up by 7:15-7:30 AM.

We do not argue with this plan, but in this situation it seems to us that particular priority should be given to making bus access attractive, easy and convenient. Unfortunately, under present plans, buses are going to be stuck in the same auto traffic and congestion that RMAG forecast. The two key bus only links to the station that RMAG proposed-- dedicated bus lanes on the Soapstone extension and the Sunset Hills bus only lanes--are unlikely to be built during the next several years.

Fairfax County is currently in the process of revising its bus service to link up with the new station. All bus service from Reston and Herndon to West Falls Church will end when the station opens. It will be replaced by bus service to Wiehle station. The county also plans to discontinue the few buses that run from the Reston-Herndon area to Crystal City-Pentagon.

This is a work in progress. Changes have come as frequently as the last few weeks. The County has placed tentative routes and time intervals (but not schedules) for Reston rush hour service on the Fairfax DOT website. Preliminary analysis suggests that most of the new service will simply follow existing routes but terminate at the Wiehle station rather than West Falls Church. An exception is Route #585, which expands service to Franklin Farms.

The county has apparently decided that rush hour bus service will not be timed to meet trains because during rush hour Metro trains will be departing or leaving every six or seven minutes. This makes good sense to us. However, it is not clear how the county plans to schedule bus service during non-rush hours when trains will run less frequently. During these periods we think bus service should coincide with Metro arrivals and departures.

The county does not appear to anticipate changes to the routes of RIBs buses to the station. The RIBs service is particularly important for Restonians since it will serve the station during non-rush hours. The absence of change appears to create some significant issues. RIBs 4, the only service from North Reston, and RIBs 5 from Herndon do not go to the Wiehle station. They end in Town Center. RIBs 2, the only RIBs service that serves the South Lakes area of Reston does not go directly from there to Wiehle but continues on to the Herndon Monroe garage. And it is not clear how RIBs service will be timed to meet the less frequent rush hour trains.

A new "circulator" bus route is to be established along Sunrise Valley and Sunset Hills, presumably to serve the suburban business parks as well as the US Geological Survey. But the schedule for this service is unclear.

The county plans extensive public out reach to Dulles corridor residents regarding bus service in 2013. The initial briefings in Reston will occur on 7 February and 11 February. However, Reston is just one of five areas affected--and much of the county effort has focused on Tysons Corner where no good bus service has previously existed. Therefore, we think that it is essential that Reston bus riders and civic associations should make a special effort to examine proposed Reston bus service to determine if more fundamental changes are needed.

Recommendation #2: That RA and RCA form a joint sub-committee, perhaps based on the RA Transportation Advisory Committee and including actual bus riders, to review and comment on the details of the proposed bus service.

Furthermore, the proposed routes appear to be based on current patterns and levels of bus ridership. We think the County should be prepared to closely monitor bus use in 2014 because the arrival of Metro may create significant changes in the pattern of bus ridership.

Bus Routing: We think that bus access to the Wiehle station will be most attractive to riders if it can avoid the projected congestion at Wiehle between Sunset Hills and Sunrise Valley Drive. We suggest the County develop Reston bus routes that approach the station via either the DTR or via Sunset Hills from Reston Parkway and Metro Center Drive. Bus Route #585, from South Reston Park and Ride, already uses Reston Parkway to get to the DTR and will be able to access the south side bus ramps.

Recommendation # 3: That where possible the County utilize bus access routes to the station such as the Dulles Toll Road and Sunset Hills.

Herndon buses: The County plans for most buses from Herndon to approach Wiehle station via the DTR after an intermediate stop at the Herndon Monroe garage. This seems an expeditious route that will also serve parkers and encourage drop-offs at the Herndon Monroe garage.

No left turn? One issue is that VDOT has decided that buses for Herndon, Dulles Airport and Loudoun leaving the south side ramps will not be able to re-access the DTR via a left turn onto the Wiehle Bridge and a second left turn back onto the DTR. They will have to make two right turns—onto Wiehle and then on to Sunrise Valley--before re-entering the toll road at Reston Parkway or traveling on to the Herndon-Monroe garage. This is a recipe for even more congestion on these roads and a slow, less attractive ride for passengers.

The reason given for this by VDOT is that the bus ramps are positioned in such a way that buses could not get back onto the Wiehle exit ramp to make a proper turn. However, autos will still be able to make a left turn.

We think this should be reviewed, particularly for buses in the evening. The morning buses will mostly be empty at this point but the evening buses will be filled with riders out bound from Washington. Although there may be minor delays for auto traffic, we think bus riders should be encouraged and buses given priority. Requiring buses to stay bogged down in Reston traffic is no way to attract riders. And this change would only be temporary, during the period in which Wiehle is the end of the Silver line.

Recommendation #4: That VDOT review the prohibition on left turns for buses at the Wiehle bus ramps.

DTR bus lanes: As noted, we think buses should be given priority and use the DTR where possible. One approach to expediting bus traffic would be to create “bus only lanes” on the east and west bound shoulders of the DTR. This approach has been used very successfully on the extension of the Dulles Toll Road between the Beltway and West Falls Church. It has enabled buses going to the West Falls Church station to by-pass congestion on the extension.

If the “bus only” lanes ran from the Herndon Monroe garage, they would encourage “kiss and ride” drop-off at the garage.

Recommendation # 5: That MWAA should consider bus only lanes on the shoulders of the Dulles Toll Road between Wiehle Ave and the Herndon Monroe garage.

Links to Town Center: Restonians want the Town Center to remain the urban hub of Reston. Until the Reston Town Center station opens, every effort should be made to establish frequent links between the Wiehle station and the Town Center.

At this point, instead of providing a separate shuttle, Fairfax County plans to extend existing bus routes into the Town Center, from which they would continue to Wiehle station. According to a County officer, they will be clearly marked “Wiehle Station.” The County hopes this will provide sufficiently frequent service. At this point, it is unclear whether such a service would be better than an earmarked Wiehle –Town Center shuttle and how the buses will connect with rush hour and all non-rush hour trains

Recommendation # 6: That the Reston Town Center Association review and comment on the adequacy of proposed bus service between the Wiehle station and Town Center.

BETTER ACCESS FROM NORTH AND SOUTH--A MORE DRAMATIC IDEA

As noted earlier, access to the station from south Reston is particularly problematic. At this point, any improvement is dependent on redevelopment of the Vornado Property immediately adjacent to the south side of the station and construction of the Soapstone Connection. Both appear to be a long way off.

To the north of the station, the Sunset Hills/ Wiehle intersection already is a major source of delays.

We believe, however, there is merit in the County and the private landholders considering establishment of **bus only access** to the station via private properties to the north and south of the Station.

On the south side, existing roads (Association Drive and a service road) go directly to the south side station access. The parking area there appears to allow room for a bus turn around.

On the north side, it may be possible to divert buses off of Wiehle Avenue into the Isaac Newton development via Isaac Newton Square North and Isaac Newton Square West. This route would connect with the “Metro Center Drive” route to the station. The county already has tentative plans to upgrade the Isaac Newton West route and COMSTOCK is currently upgrading “Metro Center Drive.”

Fairfax County officers told us that this type of public –private cooperation is “unprecedented” and they thought it extremely difficult to accomplish. Indeed, questions of liability and maintenance would have to be resolved. In addition, practical problems would have to be resolved such as the presence of child care centers at Isaac Newton Square and a crossing of the WOD trail in the area. We note that public-private cooperation has worked at Tysons Corner and Town Center, where privately owned roads are used by the public.

Recommendation # 7: That Fairfax County enter into discussions with Vornado and the owners of Isaac Newton Square regarding the establishment of better bus-only access to the Wiehle station.

INCENTIVES FOR BUS AND CARPOOL ACCESS TO THE STATION

At this point there is no overall program to encourage bus and carpool access to the station in lieu of use of single-occupant vehicles. We think several approaches should be considered to encourage such use.

One asset that could be utilized is the 2300-plus space garage at the station. Current estimates by knowledgeable observers are that the garage will be filled up as early as 7:15 AM.

We think that fees and restrictions at the garage should be considered in this regard. We suggest high rates be established for individual drivers--at least during rush hours-- to encourage using alternate transit options to the station. We think lower rates should be offered to car pools of three or more riders.

We also suggest that steps be taken to encourage use of the Herndon Monroe garage and the South Reston Park and Ride lot both for parking and “kiss and ride” drop off. Current plans are for the garage to remain free of charge but there will be a “normal” bus fare for the short trip to Wiehle. We suggest that the County examine offering a free bus ride between Herndon Monroe garage and Wiehle station to encourage bus use.

The South Reston Park and Ride lot is currently underutilized. As noted earlier in the paper, bus route #585, which will run from the lot to Wiehle station, is set up to provide virtual non-stop express service. We suggest a free fare on this bus from the lot to the station to encourage full use of the lot as well as “kiss and ride” drop offs.

Although there is always concern that measures like these cost money, we note that with the ending of bus service to West Falls Church, the county anticipates substantial savings.

Recommendation # 8: Fairfax County should establish a program to encourage alternatives to single occupant vehicle trips to the Wiehle Station.

PEDESTRIAN AND BIKE ACCESS

Promoting pedestrian and bike access to the station was a major goal of the RMAG study and some useful improvements are being made to encourage this. The COMSTOCK proffers call for improvements to sidewalks in the immediate vicinity of the station and Fairfax County is funding a number of other projects. Some of these like the bike lanes along Soapstone have been completed as part of the Soapstone “road diet.”

Other major projects funded include:

- An overpass or underpass on the WOD trail across Wiehle north of the station.
- A new mile-long sidewalk on the south side of Sunrise Valley Drive from Soapstone to South Lakes Drive.
- An upgrade of the asphalt path on the north side of Sunrise Valley.

There are many smaller projects in the work as well. However, some of these projects will not be completed until long after Wiehle station opens. For example, the estimated completions date for the Sunrise Valley sidewalk is 2017.

In addition, some important pedestrian and bike links recommended by RMAG have not been undertaken:

- Most significant is the Soapstone connection. It was originally envisioned as a key bike and pedestrian link from the southwest of the station. Now, however, the improved bike lanes on Soapstone itself dead end on Sunrise Valley and pedestrians and bikers, without access via Commerce Park, will have to navigate a crowded area to reach the station.
- A major bike link to the Lake Anne area was proposed by RMAG on the east side of Wiehle Avenue from Fairways Drive to the station. Although still on the plan this is unfunded.

Furthermore, in the immediate area of the station there are few medians or pedestrian safety zones.

We think that the Reston Association’s Pedestrian and Biking Advisory Committee (PBAC) has a particular role to play in determining pedestrian and biking improvement

priorities. Its **Reston on Foot** has been a guiding force for improved pedestrian and biking paths.

Recommendation # 9: That the Reston Association's Pedestrian and Bicycling Advisory Committee review ongoing projects to help ensure timely completion before the station opens and recommend any urgent additional measures needed.

Longer term, there is a need for a review of **pedestrian and biking needs** throughout Reston related to the station. For example, in the area near Tall Oaks—about $\frac{3}{4}$ miles from the station- there are many projects that would improve pedestrian and bike access. These include:

- A continuous sidewalk along North Shore.
- A connection at the Wiehle tunnel between the existing RA path and the Wiehle Avenue sidewalk.
- Curb cuts on RA paths for bikes.

The RA PBAC should look into and prioritize needed improvements within a few miles of the station.

Better Pedestrian Lighting: An area that badly needs attention is improved street lighting, particularly in residential neighborhoods near the station. Poor lighting promotes anxiety about security, increases the potential for accidents and discourages pedestrian use. We suggest the RA PBAC, because of its familiarity with regularly utilized pedestrian walkways, survey residential areas near the station for better lighting and recommend priorities for improvement

PARKING REGULATIONS AND RESTRICTIONS

During our research for this paper we found considerable anxiety among residents regarding the potential impact of commuter parking on Reston neighborhoods and uncertainty about how to limit such parking. For example, some Restonians think there is a legal restriction “no commuter parking.”

In fact, the County has a well established program to deal with the situation. It is called the “Residential Permit Parking District” (RPPD). The program is designed to restrict parking during established hours near Metro stations and other locations. The program restricts parking on *public* streets to residents and visitors with an appropriate permit. We were told that some Reston residents south of the station have already contacted the County regarding such a program.

Recommendation # 10: That supervisor Hudgins publicize the Residential Permit Parking Districts program and provide instructions for residents to request its implementation.

ONE STOP SHOPPING

One issue that became apparent during work on this paper is the absence of any one agency or person to serve as a coordinator for issues relating to the Station. Although personnel in Supervisor Hudgins' office and in various agencies have been helpful, many players have a hand in issues relating to Wiehle station. These include MWAA, WMATA (Metro), Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority (owner of the WOD trail), Virginia Department of Transportation, and Fairfax County Department of Transportation. Private entities like COMSTOCK also have a key role.

As we get closer to the opening of the station—and surely in the months immediately afterward—numerous issues are going to become apparent that cannot now be clearly discerned. A substantial public is going to depend on efficient functioning of the station and related access. Media interest will be intense.

We do not have in mind anyone who would take over responsibilities from different agencies or “direct action.” Instead, we think one focal point would enhance problem solving, and improve coordination between agencies and communication with the public. Supervisor Hudgins' Transportation Advisory Council serves a very useful function in this regard, but only meets once every three months.

Recommendation # 11: That Supervisor Hudgins work with related agencies to establish a focal point for Wiehle station issues.