

## Commuting with HRT – Why Can't More of Us Get On Board?

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Picture this: willingly sitting in your car for up to 45 minutes every day – with nothing keeping you from your destination except the same old tunnel. Why would you choose that?

Sarah Haymes is a 21-year-old student at Old Dominion University who temporarily lives in Smithfield. Every day, around 4 p.m., Sarah prepares to leave for work – she works at Macarthur Mall in Norfolk. She gets into uniform and packs her bag, including some extra money. Finally, Sarah pulls out of her parents' driveway at 4:30, ready to face traffic. If she is lucky, Sarah arrives at 5 o'clock, just in time; unfortunately, that does not always happen.

Sarah has been up to thirty-five minutes late for work because of traffic. Traveling home after class or day shifts can be even worse with traffic. One time, Sarah sat in traffic at the Downtown Tunnel for forty-five minutes trying to get home.

Once Sarah is at work, her evenings can be very exciting, packed with work and income. However, as a waiter, not all shifts are successful for Sarah. On weekends, for six-hour shifts, Sarah pays \$2 for parking; for five-hour weekday shifts, Sarah pays \$3 for parking. Unfortunately, on slow nights, Sarah will not even make enough money to cover her parking.

Thus, Sarah has a couple of solutions. First, she always carries extra money to work. If necessary, Sarah will spend money in order to work. To avoid traffic, Sarah schedules her days to avoid peak rush hour time, too.

The Hampton Roads Transit (HRT) controls public transportation in this area. In fact, the HRT serves the seven area cities: Norfolk, Virginia Beach, Chesapeake, Hampton, Newport News, Portsmouth, and Suffolk. There are a total of almost 100 services provided. That number includes buses, shuttles, tours, trolleys, vans, and ferries. In an area that reaches 1.3 million people, an average of 41,000 people ride an HRT service each day from December 2005 through June 2006.

Specifically looking at Norfolk, the public transportation service includes the Norfolk Electric Transit (NET), the Light Rail System (LRS), and HRT – specifically referring to buses for the purpose of this article. In Norfolk, there are sixteen buses, six special tour or shuttle services, the NET, and the Elizabeth River Ferry, which, in the first half of 2006, had almost 5.6 million people riding, total. The LRS has not actually been built yet, but it has been estimated to transport 11,500 people a day once it starts operating. Although more than 5.5 million people riding a total of 262,373 hours of HRT and other service operations seems like a lot, public transportation in Norfolk is not actually used that much.

For me, one of the biggest issues with the Hampton Roads area is traffic. So many people are driving personal vehicles and causing congestion that commuting is now one of the worse parts of a Hampton Roads' professional's day. The most immediate solution to traffic is increasing HRT use, not legislatures' plan to build new roads. When talking to citizens of Hampton Roads, there are many reasons people ride HRT. However, there are equally as many reasons why people prefer their private vehicles. The biggest issue, then, is what HRT officials are doing to improve problems and accentuate positives of riding HRT.

There are several reasons for riding HRT. First, commuters save money when riding the bus system. Also, eliminating driving frees a lot of time in a person's life. Plus, driving can cause a lot of stress and anxiety for people. In addition, think of how hard finding a parking spot is in Hampton Roads. To conclude, an HRT commuter is affected by the poor conditions of the roads, generally caused by construction and over-use.

One ticket to ride an HRT bus costs \$1.25; right now, one gallon of gas costs \$2.00. The distance between Norfolk's Waterside and Virginia Beach's Oceanfront is about eighteen miles. If the average car goes thirteen miles a gallon, then that drive would cost almost \$3. By bus, however, the trip only takes \$1.25. Actually traveling is not the only way money is saved, either. Josh DeVan, 23, a commuter student at Old Dominion University knows how expensive owning a car can be: "I just spent almost \$1000 getting new breaks and tires for my car. I'm glad I don't have to do that all the time." According to Virginia's Department of Rail and Public Transportation, the average commuter that uses public transportation saves \$5000 a year. What would you do with that extra money?

Money is not the only thing saved when riding public transportation. According to the Department of Rail and Public Transportation, the average commuting Virginian spends thirty-four hours a year sitting in traffic. Norfolk is considered a high-traffic area, thus forcing people to suffer even longer waits in traffic. I do not think you can consider yourself a true resident of Hampton Roads if you have not sat through military traffic, a back up at the Monitor Merrimac Bay Bridge Tunnel, or an opening of the Berkley Bridge. The Department of Rail and Public Transportation claims that every bus could

potentially remove up to sixty vehicles off the road. Sixty vehicles take up an average of six city blocks. Plus, if it takes about twenty-five minutes to drive from Norfolk's Waterside to Virginia Beach's Oceanfront, taking a bus gives a traveler that much more free time. Instead of fighting traffic on the roads, a commuter could ride a bus and have time to read the newspaper or review notes for an upcoming meeting. Sarah Haymes would no longer need to schedule her days around traffic patterns. Instead, she could leave around the same time, relax during the commute, and be guaranteed to arrive at her destination on time.

With extra time and money, people's lives become less stressful. Plus, driving is extremely stressful and easily causes anxiety. After living in Europe for four months, where I was not driving at all, my heart rate was so low even my doctor was impressed. The risk of car accidents can also stress people. If you are constantly checking to make sure other people do not mess up while driving, that paranoia can bleed into everyday life. After two different car accidents within two weeks, Jenny (pseudonym), early 20s, was afraid to even cross a street. She has not been driving since September but is finally feeling more confident near roads. However, Jenny still refuses to get into most cars; now she only rides HRT, but feels safe traveling.

Besides safety, parking is another issue with driving. Having to circle blocks on a Friday night in downtown Norfolk is a regular occurrence. Rebecca Beauchamp, 21, a resident and professional of Norfolk, plainly states "parking is a bitch," emphasizing how a lot of people in the area feel. Plus, think how much money is spent on a parking spot. It costs \$4 to park in a city garage in Norfolk for an evening event. Macarthur Center cost \$1 an hour to park. Sarah Haymes has to pay for parking every time she goes to

work: “Even on nights that are really slow, I usually get one table and then get to leave. I tip out and then only have enough to either pay to park or need to get out money that I brought with me that day.” If people took HRT, they would not need to find parking. Also, with fewer cars to fill parking spots, spaces would be available for special nights and emergencies.

So many cars in Hampton Roads do not only affect parking availability, but also affect road conditions. The Virginia Department of Transportation is pushing the Virginia General Assembly for six major projects in the Hampton Roads area. All projects will cost a total of \$8.9 billion with the most expensive project – a third bridge linking South Hampton Roads and the Peninsula – costing \$4.1 billion. However, all of this planning and improving does not always make driving easier. Hampton Boulevard and 21<sup>st</sup> Street have recently been stripped, repaved, and repainted. If you did not already discover, driving on a road like Hampton Boulevard is very dangerous when lane lines have not been painted. Plus, road construction adds a lot of dirt and other unpleasant attributes to Norfolk. Maribel Benton, 22, a California resident stationed in Norfolk for military, was horribly upset after gravel from a construction site cracked her windshield: “I would consider taking the bus just to avoid the roads because now my windshield is cracked”. Road decay is usually caused by overuse. As mentioned above, a bus has the potential to remove sixty vehicles from the road. If fewer people drive private vehicles and took HRT, roads like Tidewater Drive and Granby Street, which are heavily used, would remain intact longer, requiring fewer funds for maintenance.

Thus, all of the positives to using public transportation make driving private vehicles foolish. Sarah Haymes’ best solution for her commute to work is using HRT.

Still, everyone I talked to in Norfolk that had their own cars drive instead of riding buses. As a regular HRT user, I had to ask people why they choose not to use a service that could save money and time, reduce stress, ensure free parking, and maintain functioning roads.

There seems to be just as many reasons not to ride HRT as there are to ride. Some issues involve commuters' preferences, such as convenience and comfort. Other problems include accessibility and scheduling. Still, other people cite cleanliness and safety. However, the most surprising reason for not using HRT is lack of information.

Convenience and comfort are usually the first two cited reasons for not using public transportation. The bus stop might be too far away – one reason why I never go to the mall when it is raining. Sometimes people are so used to driving that not doing so would be too weird. Jen (pseudonym), early 40s, a professional in Norfolk, drives everyday from Chesapeake to the Children's Hospital of the King's Daughters. When asked why she never looked into HRT, Jen says she likes having her own private place in order to escape to when at work. Although she have never actually left the building to go to her car, except for lunch trips, Jen uses the idea of having her own space as security.

Related to convenience, accessibility becomes an issue involving location of stops to commuters' destinations and time required to travel. When a person has to be at work at 8:30 in the morning, every minute is used for a specific purpose. Waiting for a late bus or taking varying amounts of time to get somewhere is not tolerated. The last time I rode HRT, I faced such issues. After waiting twenty minutes, and almost giving up, the bus finally arrived. The trip, from Hampton Boulevard and 42<sup>nd</sup> Street to Bank Street and Charlotte Street, should take less than fifteen minutes; it took me almost forty-five

minutes. The bus waited at Sentara Norfolk General Hospital for several minutes, and just as it was pulling away, a customer yelled for the bus to wait. After fifteen minutes of the bus driver preparing the seats for the new, handicapped passenger, we finally continued with the route. I am glad the passenger took the bus, but I wish he had arrived earlier, instead of making the system even farther behind schedule, and me even later for my meeting. Plus, buses do not come by very often. If you have to be at the Scope Arena by 5 in the evening, and you ride Bus Route 4, you have to catch a bus at 43<sup>rd</sup> Street and Elkhorn Avenue, near Old Dominion University, at 3:48pm. Bus Route 4 only runs once an hour and arrives at the Scope Arena at twenty-one minutes past every hour. As a result, you would arrive at 4:21 and have to wait at Scope for almost forty minutes.

Cleanliness may be an issue, but safety is more important. The buses may be dirty, with receipts on the floor, but that is very unusual. In fact, of all the times I have ridden HRT, only twice did I see trash on the floor. Once the bus was on its last run and needed to be cleaned before the driver went home. The second time, a young rider sat in the back and emptied his pockets onto the floor. In comparison, I have questioned my own safety a few more times. Maribell Benton made a good point when she talked about safety: “It’s scary because I have no control over who comes in and who goes out.” Public transportation across most of the United States has a stigma; it is seen as unclean and unsafe. The stereotypes say poor people ride buses through ghetto neighborhoods. Sarah DeVan, 20, a life-long resident of Virginia Beach and current student at Virginia Tech, has never ridden HRT. She notes that “some public transportation stops [are] associated with sketchy people and ... who would be riding it and what kind of people would be hanging around the stops” really affects whether she would ride HRT.

One of the most surprising reasons for not riding HRT is because people do not know about it. Elba Munex, 24, a Norfolk resident, and Maribel Benton are both stationed at the Norfolk Naval Base together. They have seen buses in downtown Norfolk, but neither woman knew about HRT. They did not know where the stops were, how much fare cost, or any bus schedules. Plus, Elba and Maribel did not even know where to go for more information. One of HRT's biggest problems is marketing and informing people of the services offered.

Thus, there are several reasons why people choose not to ride HRT. Some of these issues arise with all public facilities – such as who has access to a place. Other issues are specifically relevant to public transportation, but not just HRT. If these issues are universal, why are some systems more successful than others?

Sarah DeVan rides Blacksburg public buses to and from Virginia Tech regularly. The bus stop is right outside her apartment complex and buses stop every ten minutes. A \$40 transportation fee paid to the university covers her bus pass. If she chose, parking on campus is \$60 a semester, but no one is guaranteed a spot and parking lots are far from main campus. However, Sarah still drives to the mall and shopping center, despite equally accessible bus routes. She says timing her shopping is difficult, and with one transfer, the route is not direct. Other reasons Sarah drives include the weather – rain or cold gives her more reason to drive – and time. To Norfolk residents, Blacksburg seems safe, but even there Sarah “would feel more comfortable getting in [her] car than standing at a bus stop by [herself].”

To compare, Isabella Griscelli, 25, a French citizen interning in Washington D.C., only takes public transportation, as she does not own a car. Isabella carpools to Union

station then rides Metro to work, which still involves a ten-minute walk to the actual building. The Metro trip usually takes twenty minutes, but sometimes the station is so crowded, she has to wait for another train to arrive before she can ride. Isabella does not even know how much parking would cost in Washington D.C. because private transportation does not interest her: “Traffic, expenses, and environmental concerns are the main reasons to take public transportation.” However, Isabella does recognize that a car would offer independence, convenience (specifically less walking), and comfort (providing a personal space).

Like myself, Isabella has ridden both the Metro and HRT. As a result, she can compare the two systems and our results are identical. Isabella says, “HRT is the exact same thing compared to Metro buses, but Metro is more efficient.” Other complaints apply to both systems – HRT and Metro need more lines and more stops, and they need to run more frequently. However, one complaint Isabella has about Metro – providing special fares for students, children, and seniors – does not apply to HRT. HRT offers special passes for youth up to eighteen years old, and special pricing packages when buying multiple fares at once. Plus, students at Old Dominion University have free bus passes that cover unlimited rides.

It seems that the lack of success of public transportation in Norfolk is possibly due to itself. Sarah DeVan in Blacksburg and Isabella Griscelli in Washington D.C. regularly use public transportation. They face few challenges when riding buses or rails and most of the complaints are related to personal inconveniences. If these are the only issues most people have with public transportation, one wonders what is preventing HRT

from fixing these issues. Of course, HRT cannot take all the blame. Perhaps citizens of Hampton Roads need to reassess priorities in transportation.

Public transportation is just another way to travel from one destination to another. All across Europe and in other cities within the United States, buses are more efficient than private vehicles. As a result, there seems to be no major necessity for so many cars on the roads. Sarah Haymes would no longer have to worry about tunnel traffic, and neither would any other commuter.

Perhaps residents and professionals in Norfolk do not mind driving and see little value to HRT. However, I challenge everyone to give up the car for one whole day and only take buses and other forms of public transportation. You may find that life is a lot easier, or you may find that life is more challenging without driving. Whatever you discover, pass the information on to the Virginia Congress. Only they can make changes to how commuting works in Norfolk.

#### Side Bar – HRT, What’s it Good For?

Each month, millions of people ride HRT for various reasons. Commuting, grocery shopping, doctor visits, and social outings all motivate riders of public transportation. My friends and I use HRT for all travel purposes because none of us have cars. Some times, it is inconvenient; other times, riding the bus is better for us.

Christina turned 23 in October, and we all took a bus to downtown Norfolk for the celebration. Eleven people enjoyed an elaborate dinner, multiple cocktails, and lively conversation that Saturday night. Dinner reservations were at 7:15 p.m. We caught the 6:30 p.m. bus, rode it to MacArthur Mall and walked a couple of blocks to the restaurant.

The ride and parking was free (we have Old Dominion University student bus passes) and relaxing. Plus, the conversations started on the bus and continued into the restaurant without pauses or distractions. We arrived at the restaurant at 7:15 p.m. and were immediately seated. During dinner, no one had to worry about Blood Alcohol Content and everyone could take part in all festivities. Once the celebration was over, we rode an 11:30 p.m. bus back to Old Dominion University's campus.

Over all, that night was one of my favorite social outings. There was no stress, no worry about parking, and no unnecessarily spent money. Plus, the ride was very convenient since the bus schedule and our schedule matched, and no one had to worry about drinking and driving. From my personal experience, taking HRT is the best way to travel in Hampton Roads.