



Coalition for Smarter Growth

Better Communities...Less Traffic

REVIEW OF VDOT TECHWAY STUDY MORNING COMMUTER TRAFFIC CROSSING AMERICAN LEGION BRIDGE -- STUDY DATA SHOWS NO NEED FOR NEW BRIDGE --

At most 2000 Commuters Make U-Shaped Commute – No Justification for \$1 Billion+ Bridge

Proponents of a new Potomac River bridge crossing, the so-called “techway,” have long claimed that “U-shaped commuters” are clogging the American Legion Bridge and that this justifies a new bridge to get them directly from homes to jobs in Montgomery and Fairfax/Loudoun.

Yet the new study shows that at most 2000 commuters out of 24,679 Maryland and Virginia cars counted are making what could be called a U-shaped commute:

- Just **342** vehicles travel from Virginia’s Dulles Corridor, Route 7, Route 28/7100, Route 15, and I-66 to Gaithersburg (Table 3-3).
- Just **1637** Maryland vehicles from the I-270 Corridor (Montgomery from the Beltway out & Frederick) travel to the Dulles Corridor, Route 7 and I-66 (not including Tyson’s Corner which is directly adjacent to the Beltway) (Table 3-6). The actual number is likely smaller if residents living in North Bethesda with nearby access to the Beltway are subtracted out.

So, the spin given to the Washington Post (May 11, 2004, B-1) by the report authors and VDOT, that “thousands of drivers make a horseshoe commute between the western suburbs of both states,” is simply not true.

“Westbound” Commuters Are Not the Same as “U-Shaped Commuters” AND Study Authors and VDOT Inflated “Westbound” Numbers in the Writeup

While the study consultants reported a very accurate job of counting and matching commuters to zip codes of origin, the Executive Summary, Analysis, Findings and Maps were used to inflate the number of “westbound” commuters and to create a misleading impression of demand for a new bridge.¹ Citing the study, the Washington Post reported that, “Nearly two-thirds of Maryland commuters head west to jobs once they enter Virginia.” Yet, most of those are coming from homes near the Beltway and inside the Beltway. They are not “U-Shaped Commuters.” All percentages of vehicles originating to the west of the Beltway or having destinations west of the Beltway cited in the findings on pages 4-2 and 4-3 were inflated by the following:

- The report increases the numbers of “west” bound commuters by treating near-Beltway job center destinations like Tyson’s Corner and Rock Spring/N. Bethesda as “western.” These are adjacent to the Beltway and far from a potential new bridge crossing. Commuters going to

¹ Hint of bias toward inflating westbound numbers is found on p 2-3: “Budget considerations caused exclusion of several desirable data collection sites; **decisions were guided by focus of analysis on likely destinations beyond the Beltway**”

these destinations would not benefit from a new crossing because they would be forced to join equally congested traffic headed inbound to these centers.²

- The report includes commuters originating in near-Beltway neighborhoods and locations inside the Beltway in the westbound percentages, but these are not, nor will they be, “U-shaped commuters.” For example, included in the “western” destination totals by the study authors are residents of DC, Bethesda, College Park, Mclean, Arlington, Falls Church, and Alexandria and the report implies that someone driving from these neighborhoods out to a job in Reston would be a “U-shaped commuter,” which they are not.
- The report inflates the percentage of drivers assigned to “western” origins and destinations by moving the boundary between eastern and western farther to the east to Georgia Avenue. This increases the perceived percentage of vehicles going “west” up I-270 and decreases the percentage going east and inside the Beltway. It similarly increases the number of Marylanders originating “west” and outside the Beltway up I-270 and decreasing the number originating east of I-270 and inside the Beltway (see findings on pages 4-2 and 4-3). For example, someone driving from Kensington would be considered a “western” origin and by implication a “U-shaped commuter.”
- By deleting cameras on the mainline of 495 just south of I-66 (a camera location which would have been similar to the location on Maryland’s mainline just past I-270 spur) and cameras at Virginia Route 50 e/w and Route 7 west (into Tyson’s) the report reduces the total number of Maryland commuters counted and the number counted as “eastbound” to near Beltway and inside Beltway destinations. Both act to inflate the percentage of westbound commuters. For example, a Marylander going to the Fairview Park office park at Route 50 would not be counted in the eastern totals.
- The Maps of zip codes shaded on both sides of the river creates the impression of demand to cross that does not exist according to the traffic counts. The report authors include an “Overall” finding on page 4-4 citing figure 3-7 to say that there is a “concentration of commuters around I-495 and along the western radial routes.” That means little, because at most 2000 of these are the “U-shaped commuters.”

Conclusion: The Washington Post reported, “But VDOT planners also acknowledged that the information could bolster arguments for building a bridge across the Potomac west of the Beltway...” To the contrary, the actual numbers in the study show that the majority of the commuters with origins outside the Beltway who cross the American Legion Bridge are going to near-Beltway job centers and to centers inside the Beltway, not to destinations across the river and far west of the Beltway. With at most 2000 commuters making the so-called “U-shaped commute,” a \$1 billion+ new bridge and outer beltway segment cannot be justified.

Figure 2-1, the Site Location Map shows that the Beltway provides a straight line between major job centers at Tyson’s Corner and North Bethesda. Given the large majority of vehicles traveling to these near-Beltway destinations and to destinations inside the Beltway, the report documents the need for more options along this straight line commute. These options range from carpooling, and potential conversion of lanes to HOV lanes to manage demand, to Purple Line circumferential transit. At the same time, other traffic data will likely show that commuters would also be helped by measures to address inward AND outward radial traffic -- using a mix of carpool, rail and bus transit, and links between development and transit. The report does not establish the need for a new bridge.

² Deletion of cameras for budgetary reasons meant that no cameras were provided to measure the exact number exiting at Democracy Blvd, Montrose Road, Falls Road, and Route 28.