

COMMUTER

DR. GRIDLOCK

Robert Thomson

A Few Hot Tips For Icy, Slippery Winter Drives

Dear Dr. Gridlock: After driving home in the snow [Thursday] afternoon and observing the inability of my fellow drivers to cope with slippery roads, I thought I would offer some winter driving tips. While I don't claim to be an expert, several years of commuting through New England winters gave me some experience that many Washington area residents seem to lack. The most important tip is that if you don't absolutely have to drive in the ice and snow, stay home. Even if you have the driving skills to handle wintry roads, most of your fellow drivers do not.

If your car or truck is moving, and all four wheels are on ice, you cannot control your vehicle. If, however, you do need to venture out on icy roads, here are some suggestions:

Buy good tires. If your tires are bad, there is nothing you can do to make yourself a safe winter driver. Ask your tire dealer specifically for tires that handle well in the snow.

Control your speed. The faster you drive, the easier it is to lose control. The combined factors of your vehicle's handling, tire traction, traffic, the road conditions and your driving skill should determine your speed. But don't go slower than necessary. Someone driving 10 mph on the Beltway frustrates everyone, which leads to foolish decisions by other drivers.

Understand momentum. Because you have less traction on a slippery road, your vehicle is less able to overcome the effects of momentum. It is better to slow down by easing off the gas rather than stepping on the brake.

You can consolidate all the winter driving tips into one: Drive your car like a boat. You cannot stop on a dime, nor can you make sharp turns. Leave plenty of room around you in all directions and realize that you may be sliding a bit.

Michael Scalia
Leesburg

Thousands of Washingtonians drive when they're distracted or drowsy. There's no good time for that, but in winter weather, it's especially dangerous. Don't count on your trick driving skills to get you out of a problem. Thinking ahead to avoid a problem is your most relevant skill.

Many transportation officials note that Washington's wintry conditions often fluctuate between, snow, sleet and freezing rain. One commute can involve all three.

Our worst encounters with winter usually occur when the snow or mix begins just in time for a rush period and the highway crews have not had time to treat the roads. Be especially careful on bridges. Road-surface conditions can change abruptly.

What else would you recommend, or do you think Washington drivers get a bad rap?

Station Managers

Dear Dr. Gridlock:

Is Metro management conserving funds by reducing station staffing? Just after 5 p.m. on Jan. 6, card-readers at the Grosvenor Station rejected my senior fare card, directing me to see the station manager.

Although the kiosk displayed the name of an individual who purportedly was on duty, no Metro employee materialized during a nearly 10-minute wait, after which I departed in perplexity and frustration.

How about equipping each station manager with a sign stating that he or she has briefly stepped away and will be back shortly?

John Howe
Gaithersburg

Metro did reduce its overall workforce last year to save money, but there are no times when it would deliberately leave a station unstaffed. The Transit Authority checked on your report and believes the station manager was in the station at the time.

Station managers have many duties. Their assignments include making sure the elevators, escalators and vending machines are working and checking on platforms and parking areas. From time to time, riders complain to me about managers they say are holed up in their kiosks when they should be out helping customers.

On the afternoon of Jan. 6, the station manager may have been escorting a passenger to a restroom or doing a check of the station.

Some Metrorail stations are quite large, and I like the idea of posting a sign at the kiosk indicating that the manager will return soon. It at least inspires confidence, even if there can't be a specific sign for every occasion that requires the manager's attention.

General Manager John B. Catoe Jr. has talked about Metro's clear need to get more information to riders, especially during service disruptions. He and the Metro board have discussed ideas for additional signs that could be displayed at stations.

Dr. Gridlock appears Thursday in the Extras and Sunday in the Metro section. You can send e-mails to drgidlock@washpost.com. Include your name, home community and phone numbers. Get There: blog.washingtonpost.com/getthere.

Taxi! Taxi!

THE DISTRICT'S DEBATE over zones vs. meters has been around since the 1930s.

With its 23 zones, each with a flat fee, the District is the only major U.S. city that does not rely on meters. Many riders complain that the system is confusing, unfair and subject to abuse.

The District also is different from every other major U.S. city in that the vast majority of taxi drivers are inde-

pendent contractors, which some say makes for spotty and inconsistent service. Riders argue that they can take the same ride, at the same time, same day of the week and yet be charged different rates.

Cabbies fear the meter system will strip them of their autonomy and lead to over-regulation, ultimately cutting into their profits. A majority of cabdrivers wanted a zone meter system, which maintains zones as a base for

calculating fares but shows riders what they are being charged on a meter that uses the Global Positioning System.

In the end, Mayor Adrian M. Fenty and other supporters of the meter system said it will help improve service and give the city a professional, world-class taxi system.



BY TODD LINDEMAN—THE WASHINGTON POST

Want to Know What You'd Pay With Meter vs. Zones?

Use our online estimator to determine if your District cab fare will increase or decrease under the planned time-distance meters scheduled to take effect April 6. Go to the Web address www.washingtonpost.com/taxifares. There you can choose one of our samples or build your own by entering start and destination addresses. Don't know the exact address? Click and drag the red and green map markers to highlight your approximate start and destination points. There are also cool features that allow you to calculate fares for extra passengers and bags, weather and traffic. Play around and have some fun with it. Remember: These are estimates. Actual fares will vary depending on how much time is spent stopped or slowed in congested traffic. And the calculator works only on locations within the District.

Sample routes

There are several predetermined routes that give you a good idea of how the calculator works. Just pull down the tab and choose one ...

Plot your custom route

Starting and ending destinations are entered here. The return route can be calculated as well — the fare is not always the same as getting to your destination because of traffic, time of day, one-way streets, etc. Don't forget to indicate the city quadrant — NE, NW, SW or SE.

The map

The most efficient route is mapped. The start and destination markers can be moved if you want to try other destinations, and the route will be instantly redrawn.

District Taxi Fare Estimator

The estimator will help you determine if your cab fare in the District will cost more or less under the time and distance meters, which are scheduled to replace zones in April. You may choose one of our sample routes, or try your own by entering starting and destination addresses, or by dragging the green and red map markers. Remember, these are estimates. Actual fares will vary, depending upon how much time is spent stopped or slowed in congested traffic.

1 Plan your travel:

- Estimator only works with the District.
- Don't know an address? Use the map to position both the start and destination markers by dragging them to new locations.
- Want more map detail? Click a marker to get a neighborhood view on a satellite image.
- See the effect of one-way streets on fares by using the "reverse route" button.

Try a sample route:

Dupont Circle to Georgetown

Create your own route:

Starting Address: 517 Connecticut Ave NW DC

Destination Address: 3040 M Street NW DC

Reverse Route

Get route

Help

Advanced Settings

Map of travel route: Exact route may vary due to construction and other factors.

Map data ©2008 Tele Atlas, ©Turf of US

2 Compare estimated fares:

The METER fare will be cheaper by \$3.90.

METER 1.3 miles + wait charges

\$4.65 \$4.90 \$5.40

Base fare Some waiting Heavy traffic

4 min 7 min

ZONE 2 zones (1 to 2A)

\$8.80

No zone wait time charges.

No extra charges. Use Advanced Settings.

QUICK FACTS

- There are approximately 6,000 cabs in the District.
- Until the change, the District was the only major U.S. city not using a meter system.
- The District's \$3 drop rate — the amount that appears on the meter as soon as a passenger hops in — is somewhat higher than that charged in other cities. The \$2.50 drop rate is used by a number of cities, including Atlanta and New York.
- Officials estimate that meters will cost \$300 per cab.
- There are about 140,000 cab rides each day in the District.

The cost of your ride

When your route is plotted, you'll get a comparison of the estimated fare for the trip using a meter, compared with the price using the current zone system.

Not challenging enough?

Use the advanced settings to change parameters such as meter rates, rush hour vs. regular rates, adding additional passengers or luggage, radio dispatch fee and snow emergency fares. Wait time will be automatically calculated using traffic congestion models developed with Hani Mahmassani of Northwestern University's Transportation Center.

www.washingtonpost.com/taxifares

No Web Connection?

Here are two sample routes for comparison of the fares

If you're headed to Anacostia from Dupont Circle, you'd be happier with the current zone system. But if Catholic University is your destination after visiting the White House, the meter is cheaper.

Cheaper with zone



Dupont Circle to Anacostia
Distance: 5.6 miles
Fare with: Meter \$11.75 Zone \$11.00

Cheaper with meter



White House to Catholic University
Distance: 3.8 miles
Fare with: Meter \$9.25 Zone \$11.00

DR. G'S TIPS

Metroraill Delays

Many riders will encounter delays this holiday weekend because of repair work at Metro Center. Passengers, especially those bound for events at Verizon Center, should build in at least 30 minutes of extra travel time through tomorrow night. The second half of the project, which will fix the bridge that takes the Red Line tracks over the Blue and Orange lines, is scheduled for Presidents' Day weekend.

I-95 Work Coming

Construction of a fourth lane each way along the six miles between the Fairfax County Parkway and Route 123 is scheduled to start this spring. The Interstate 95 project, which also involves widening 10 bridges, including those over the Occoquan River, is scheduled to be done in September 2011.

Georgia Avenue Shift

Watch for traffic shifts scheduled to start Tuesday on the busy commuter route just

north of Norbeck Road in Montgomery County. This is part of the interconnector construction. The northbound lanes will be shifted into the newly widened median starting at Thistlebridge Drive, then move back into the old track about a quarter-mile beyond that, just south of Batchellors Forest Road.

The traffic shift, which will be in effect for about two years, will allow for construction of a Georgia Avenue bridge over the connector.

Metrobus Tokens

Everybody can buy them again. Metro General Manager John B. Catoe Jr. has reversed a decision that ended token sales for all but students and paratransit riders.

Metro would love to move riders away from tokens and cash and toward the use of the electronic SmarTrip cards. Toward that end, the transit authority handed over 50,000 free SmarTrip cards to social service agencies. "However, we have since heard

from many charitable organizations and social service agencies, which distribute tokens to the needy, that eliminating them is too burdensome," Catoe said in a statement.

DASH Route Changes

Alexandria's buses are changing some schedules as of today.

The AT2 route will be split into two routes, with the AT2 route operating on the current alignment between Braddock Road Metro station and Lincolnia Road. The new AT1 route will operate on the current AT2 alignment between Seminary Plaza and the Eisenhower Avenue Station.

Midday AT7 service on weekdays between King and Royal streets and the Nannie J. Lee Center will be eliminated. The midday AT4 route will be extended from City Hall to the Lee Center. Saturday AT4 service between the King Street Metro station and the Lee Center will be eliminated, but the Saturday AT4 route will be extended from City Hall to the Lee Center.

P Street Repairs

The District plans to begin roadway and sidewalk repairs on P Street NW between Dupont Circle and Logan Circle on Tuesday. Work hours are 7 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. weekdays, but vehicles and pedestrians will have access to the area throughout the repair work, which is scheduled to be completed by the end of March.

Rail Testing

There might be minor delays on various Metrorail lines over the next three weeks as Metro goes through a periodic ultrasound safety check of the rails. If a worn rail is identified for replacement, a Metro crew will first make a temporary fix, and trains will be required to slow down through that area. Then the rail will be replaced overnight, when the system is shut down.

For traffic information, go to www.washingtonpost.com/traffic.