

**The 5A**

**METROBUS, From A14**

to global positioning devices, the locaters allow dispatchers to track buses so they can send help if one breaks down or suggest alternate routes around a traffic jam.

But the system hasn't been used because other necessary pieces — new radios for buses and dispatchers and a computerized scheduling system — have been delayed. Internal Metro reports estimate the radio system is three years behind schedule because of technical problems.

A third technology to improve service, used by systems from San Francisco to Rehoboth Beach, Del., tells riders when the next bus is due. Metro installed a real-time information system in the subway in 2001 at a cost of \$11.5 million. But officials have said they couldn't afford a similar system for bus riders.

In September, Metro decided to spend \$6 million to allow riders to find the location of Metrobuses using cell phones or the Internet or by consulting signs at five rail stations served by bus lines: Pentagon, Silver Spring, Friendship Heights, Anacostia and Gallery Place-Chinatown. But at the other 12,430 Metrobus stops, those without Internet access or a cell phone will not benefit when the program is launched next year.

Some solutions are decidedly low tech. In Metro's surveys, non-riders say they avoid the buses largely because of the lack of information on routes and schedules. Although subway maps are free and seemingly everywhere — inside rail stations, in telephone books, even on T-shirts — a Metrobus map is a rare thing.

Two years ago, ridership on an Arlington County route jumped 30 percent after the county took it over. The difference was a green box the county installed at 22 bus stops displaying the schedule and route. "Before, there was basically nothing at the stops except a rusty pole and a 25-year-old Metrobus sign," Arlington County transit coordinator James Hamre said.

The Sierra Club lobbied Metro for a year until the agency agreed in 2003 put a systemwide Metrobus map on its Web site and said it would distribute the map for free. Metro had been selling bus maps at a \$50,000 annual profit.

But when Beryl Randall of Silver Spring called Metro for the systemwide map in May, he was launched on an odyssey. He was told to go to a subway station, then to the Montgomery County Commuter Express Transit Store, then to Metro headquarters. But he never found a map.

Finally, a Metro worker said she could send him a map she found in a desk drawer. "How do you run a transit system without letting people know where you're traveling to?" Randall asked. "It just seems elementary."

**Suburbs Pulling Ahead**

From the beginning, the buses

were an afterthought. The transit agency, which was created to build a rail system, was forced by Congress at the time to assume the operations of four failing private bus companies. Metro's engineers, planners and managers were focused on constructing a subway for the future; buses were considered a holdover from the past.

Problems worsened in the 1980s, when several suburban counties found it cheaper to run their own bus systems than pay for Metrobus. In the 1990s, when the District plunged into severe fiscal trouble, city officials cut Metrobus service by 13 percent. With money dwindling, Metro managers began deferring investments in the bus system.

Today, area communities have pulled ahead of Metrobus in innovation and technology.

Montgomery County, Arlington County, Prince George's County and Fairfax City are either using real-time bus information on their systems or experimenting with it.

Using a \$500,000 federal grant, Arlington is building a control center for bus service on Columbia Pike where managers will be able to track Metrobuses and tell Metro dispatchers how to keep them on schedule. The county also plans to create "super stops" where waiting passengers can monitor buses on closed-circuit televisions that will also provide news and reports on weather and traffic.

Arlington and Fairfax counties have launched premium bus service on Columbia Pike and Richmond Highway, paying for frequent service, new maps and innovative devices, including technology that holds a green traffic signal so an approaching bus can get through an intersection. Since the upgrade on the Columbia Pike route in 2003, ridership has increased from 9,000 to 11,500 passengers a day.

In the District, the city launched the D.C. Circulator in July, bus service designed to run so often that schedules aren't needed, using new buses designed for quick boarding and unloading.

And in October, the District signed a contract with Clear Channel Adshel under which the advertising firm will build about 800 state-of-the-art bus shelters and will pay the District more than \$150 million over 20 years to place ads there. The shelters will be equipped with bus maps and real-time information signs and will be maintained by the ad agency.

In contrast, Metro stopped building bus shelters in 1987, except for a few at new rail stations.

"It's a management problem," said Debra Atkins, a 44-year-old bus rider who says the Metrobus she takes in Prince George's is chronically late. "I think they push paper and chat and do what they do. They don't go out. There are no checks and balances. ... I'm sure they're paid six figures, a lot of them. But I don't see them doing their jobs."

**The Dreaded Dulles Link**

Dulles International Airport has grown from a cow pasture to an 11,000-acre complex, with shopping malls and residential development sprouting around it. But just one Metrobus line connects the airport to the District.

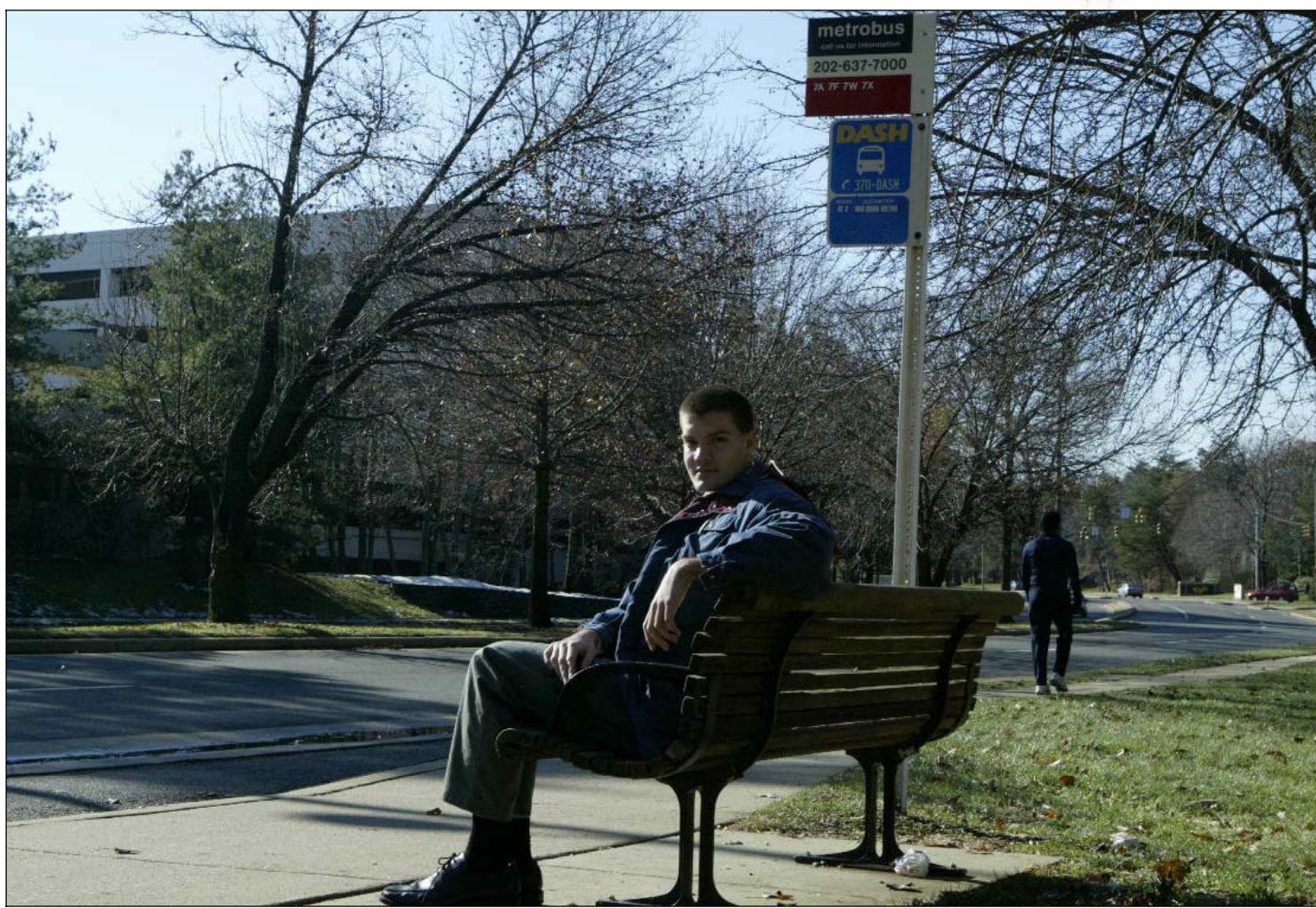
As he waited to take the 5A line for the first time in September, Matt Liberati of Fairfax County noticed a hand-made sign that someone had taped to the bus shelter at the Tysons-Westpark Transit Station. It warned that the 5A, which is scheduled to run hourly, was

unreliable.

That proved true for Liberati, who said the bus was nearly a half-hour late coming and going. The 5A was launched in 2000 and carries an average of about 1,000 passengers each weekday. Metro managers are asking the agency's board of directors to add buses to the line to improve timeliness and reduce overcrowding.

"I almost missed my flight," said Liberati, 24, who reached his airport gate with 10 minutes to spare. "I wouldn't take it again. I don't trust it."

**Matt Liberati almost missed a flight out of Dulles International Airport because a Metrobus was nearly 30 minutes late. Metro managers have sought to add buses to the line, the system's only one between the airport and the District.**

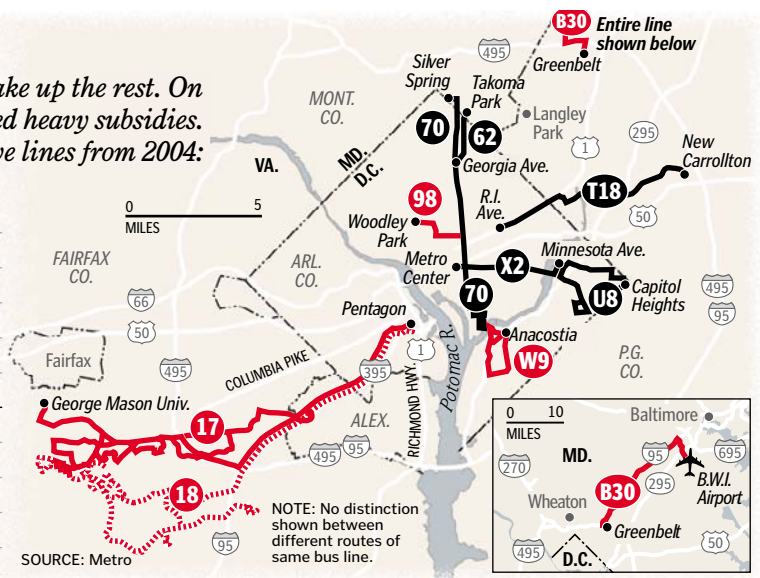


BY KEVIN CLARK — THE WASHINGTON POST

**The Best and Worst Lines**

Fares pay only a portion of the cost of a ride; taxpayer subsidies make up the rest. On some crowded lines, fares nearly cover the cost; some empty lines need heavy subsidies. The cost of operating bus lines varies. The least and most productive lines from 2004:

Line	Subsidy per passenger	Average riders per bus trip
<b>X2</b> Benning Rd.—H St.	\$0.38	59
<b>70</b> Georgia Ave.—7th St. (70, 71)	\$0.52	84
<b>U8</b> Capitol Heights—Benning Heights	\$0.75	60
<b>T18</b> Annapolis Rd.	\$0.93	45
<b>62</b> Takoma—Petworth	\$0.95	21
<b>18</b> Burke Centre (P, R, S)	\$7.64	10
<b>98</b> Adams Morgan—U St. Link	\$9.22	4
<b>17</b> Kings Park (A, B, F, M)	\$10.27	7
<b>W9</b> Defense Facilities Shuttle	\$9.62	4
<b>B30</b> Greenbelt—BWI	\$9.85	6



SOURCE: Metro

**The 30**



BY SARAH L. VOISIN — THE WASHINGTON POST

**So Much for the Schedule**

One of the longest Metrobus routes is the 12-mile line that cuts a diagonal path across the District from Anacostia, up Capitol Hill and through downtown to Georgetown and Friendship Heights. The heavily traveled 30 line carries 19,000 riders a day and serves several neighborhoods that don't have subway access, including Glover Park. But the buses cannot keep their schedule.

If the 30 line was divided into two shorter routes, the buses would be better able to run on time, Metro officials say. But they have resisted that because they estimate it

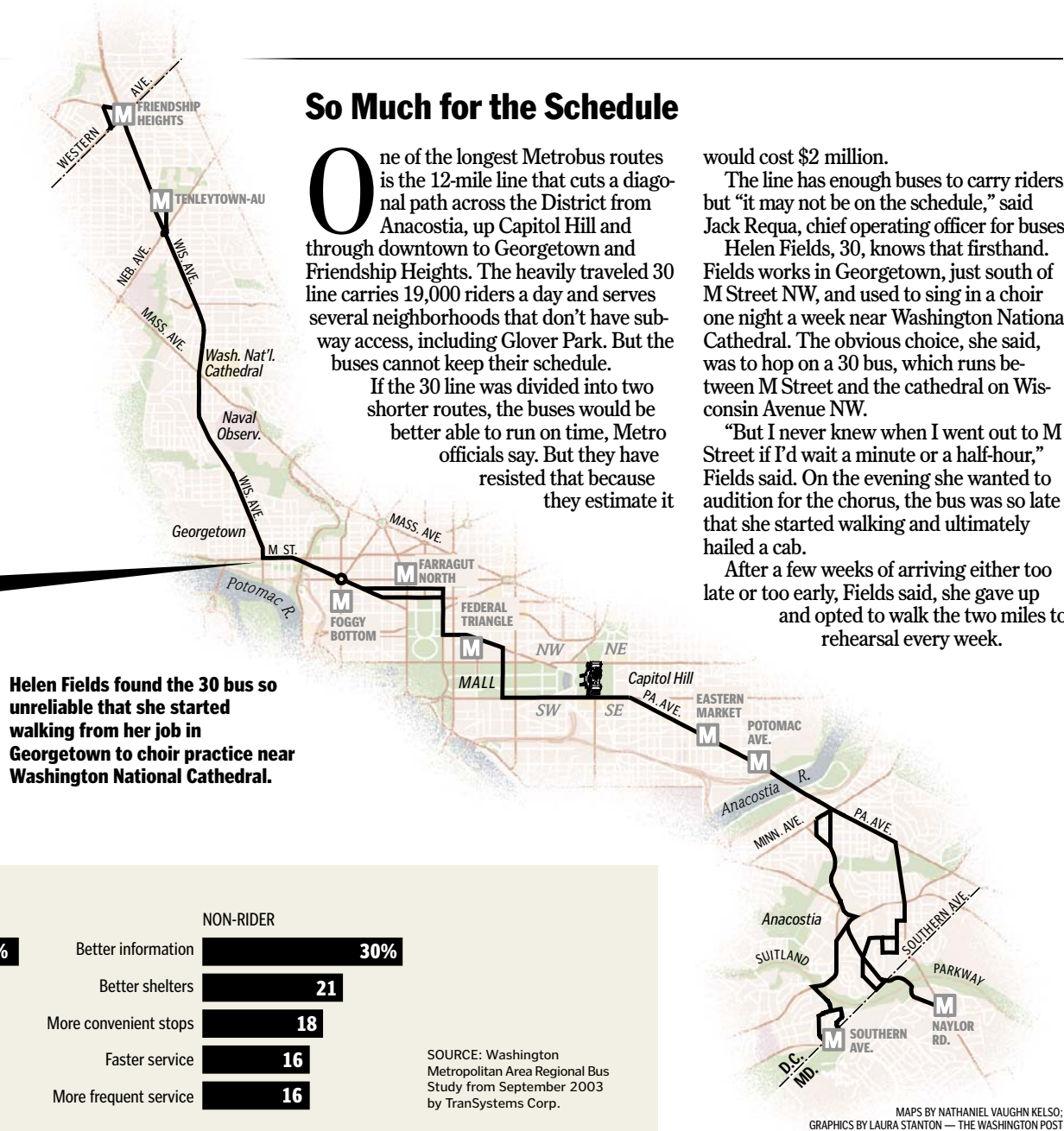
would cost \$2 million.

The line has enough buses to carry riders, but "it may not be on the schedule," said Jack Requa, chief operating officer for buses.

Helen Fields, 30, knows that firsthand. Fields works in Georgetown, just south of M Street NW, and used to sing in a choir one night a week near Washington National Cathedral. The obvious choice, she said, was to hop on a 30 bus, which runs between M Street and the cathedral on Wisconsin Avenue NW.

"But I never knew when I went out to M Street if I'd wait a minute or a half-hour," Fields said. On the evening she wanted to audition for the chorus, the bus was so late that she started walking and ultimately hailed a cab.

After a few weeks of arriving either too late or too early, Fields said, she gave up and opted to walk the two miles to rehearsal every week.

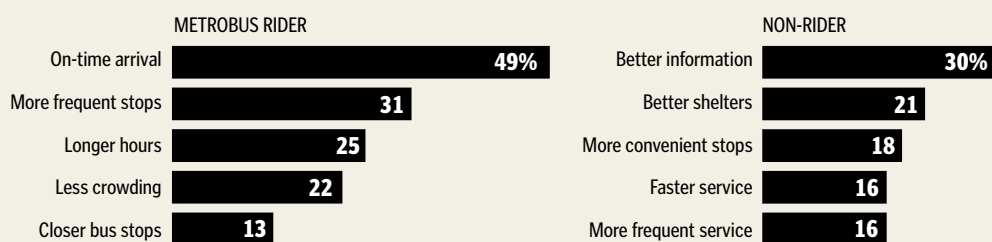


**Helen Fields found the 30 bus so unreliable that she started walking from her job in Georgetown to choir practice near Washington National Cathedral.**

MAPS BY NATHANIEL VAUGHN KELS; GRAPHICS BY LAURA STANTON — THE WASHINGTON POST

**Desired Improvements**

Surveys of Metrobus riders and non-riders show different priorities for service improvements. On-time arrival was cited most often by riders. Non-riders said better information would induce them to ride.



SOURCE: Washington Metropolitan Area Regional Bus Study from September 2003 by TransSystems Corp.