

Afton Express: Annual Report

September 2021 - December 2022



Central Shenandoah Planning District Commission
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Executive Summary

"It means saving money, a less stressful commute, and building community."

An Afton Express rider on what this service means to them.



The Afton Express completed its first year of service on September 1, 2022 and closed out the 2022 calendar year with strong performance. This service is a new commuter-centered bus route operated by Virginia Regional Transit (VRT) as part of the CSPDC's BRITE Bus system. The culmination of work spanning several years - time spent on feasibility studies, conducting outreach to potential riders, and researching solutions - was rewarded by the success experienced during this inaugural year. Despite launching the service in the midst of a global pandemic when many commuters were working from home, a small group of dedicated riders showed up and have continued riding ever since. This group of passengers grows each month.

Afton Express ridership increased 187% between September 2021 and the end of December 2022. In this first 16 months, passengers took 12,261 trips between the Staunton-Augusta-Waynesboro (SAW) region and the City of Charlottesville and Albemarle County. Ridership varies throughout the week with Wednesday having the highest and Friday having the lowest number of passenger trips. Ridership also varies across the four scheduled trips with Trip 3 (arriving at Charlottesville stops between 8:15 and 8:45 am) being the most heavily utilized run in the morning, and Trip 2 (departing Charlottesville stops between 5:00 and 5:35 pm) most utilized in the evening.

Riders board the bus mostly from the Waynesboro Park and Ride lot and the Staunton Mall, and travel to a variety of locations in the Charlottesville and Albemarle region daily. Riders are largely satisfied with the service - noting the significant impact this service has had on their commute. A rider survey deployed in September 2022 provided insight to the passenger experience and ideas for ways to continuously improve. All of these metrics, along with notable accomplishments from year one and ambitions for year two are summarized in this report.



Performance Metrics

	Sept 2021	Oct 2021	Nov 2021	Dec 2021	Jan 2022	Feb 2022	Mar 2022	April 2022
Total Monthly Passenger Trips	414	548	540	417	393	609	777	798
Average Daily Trips	19.7	26.1	27	19.9	21.8	30.5	33.8	38
	May 2022	June 2022	July 2022	Aug 2022	Sept 2022	Oct 2022	Nov 2022	Dec 2022
Total Monthly Passenger Trips	758	938	890	1122	1083	1186	1011	777
Average Daily Trips	36.1	44.7	44.5	48.8	49.2	56.5	50.6	45.7

Figure 1. Ridership by Day of Week (averaged)

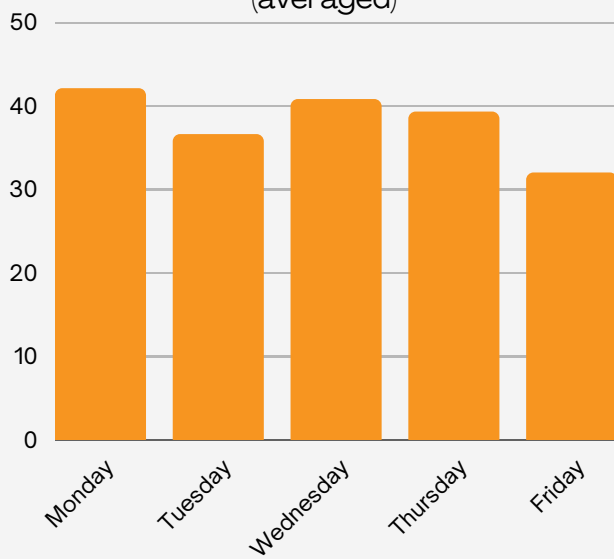
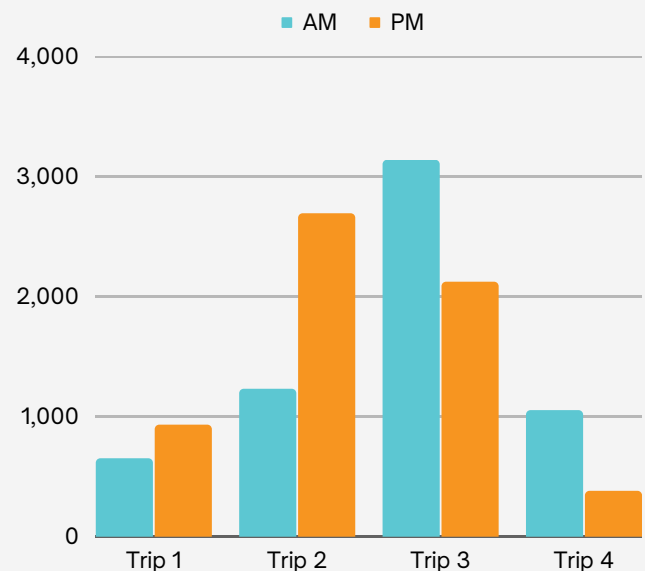


Figure 2. Ridership by Schedule/Trip



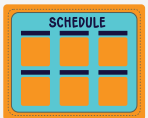
Highlights from Year One

In the first 16 months of operations, Afton Express staff worked primarily on launching and marketing the service. A few adjustments and improvements were implemented but the main focus was on making commuters and employers aware of the service. Advertising campaigns utilized "geofencing" to target commuters who live in the areas close to park-and-ride stops in the SAW region, and major employer areas in Charlottesville and Albemarle County. Radio and Weather App. advertisements were also successful in generating awareness of the new service. Beyond establishing the service as a dependable transportation solution in the region, a few notable activities from the year are highlighted below.



Online Farecard Sales through UVA Parking & Transportation

Many Afton Express riders work at the University of Virginia (UVA) or its affiliated hospital system. UVA's Parking and Transportation Department coordinated with Afton Express and Central Shenandoah Planning District Commission (CSPDC) staff to incentivize utilization of the service. Allowing UVA employees to purchase 10-punch farecards directly from UVA at a discount increases ease of access to the service for employees. This program was implemented in Spring 2022. UVA employees receive a \$5 per farecard discount when ordering through the Parking and Transportation Department.



Afternoon Arrival Time Adjustments

As more commuters returned to an in-person work environment, traffic along the Afton Express route (I-64 corridor) increased as well. As a result, the afternoon trips experienced longer travel times. In April 2022, the Afton Express afternoon schedules were adjusted to reflect this increase in travel time. The pick-up times for Charlottesville stops were not impacted, but the arrival times in the SAW region were updated to reflect the new arrival times. This change had minimal impact on riders.



Discover Transit Month

The Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation (DRPT)'s Discover Transit Month in September coincided with the one-year anniversary of operations. Afton Express celebrated both occasions by holding various promotions throughout the month. The month concluded with a customer appreciation event and live radio broadcast from the Waynesboro Park and Ride lot on September 29th. CSPDC staff utilized these promotional events to get out to the stops and interact with passengers to learn about their Afton Express experience and to thank them for their continued support.



Measuring Progress

Progress can be measured in terms of both quantitative (performance metrics) and qualitative (rider feedback) methods. At the conclusion of the first-year of operation, a survey was deployed to collect feedback from existing riders to better understand passenger experiences. Questions related to trip and stop utilization were asked to compliment the quantitative data we have on these topics. For example, passengers were asked which trip they typically take in the morning and afternoon, whether that time works well for their schedule, and if not, what time might work better. Open-ended questions were included to allow passengers an opportunity to share feedback about their experience on the Afton Express. They were also asked to describe the impact this service has had on their daily commute. Survey respondents also provided demographic information. The survey was available for over a month and during that time 30 passengers responded. A summary of the survey responses is provided in the following section of this report.

Survey Highlights

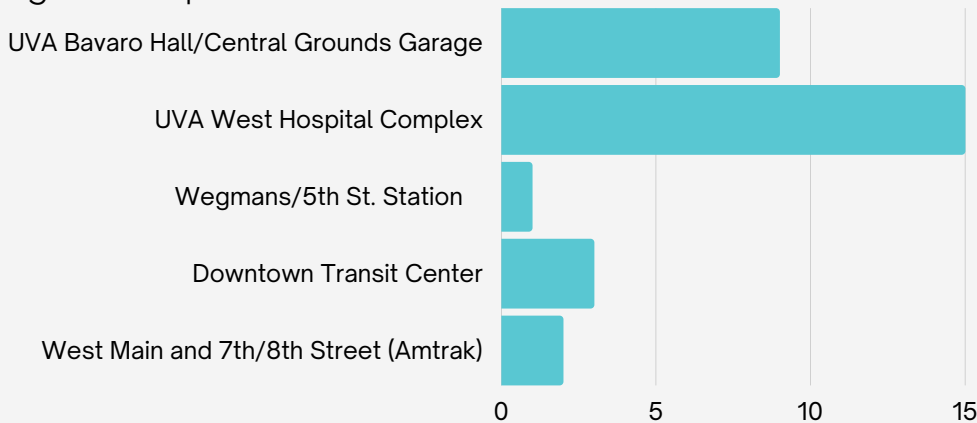
90%

of passengers **ride regularly** vs. 10% who ride Afton Express occasionally. Most passengers ride 3-4 days per week (43%), while 30% reported riding every day and 26% ride 1-2 days per week.

The most popular stops in the SAW region are the Waynesboro Park and Ride Lot (73%) and the Staunton Mall (26%)

Charlottesville and Albemarle Region Stop Utilization:

Figure 3. Stop Utilization



Most passengers indicated that the existing schedule works well for them. Forty-six percent felt the schedule was "perfect" or "near perfect". Forty-three percent felt the schedule worked OK for them but that they have to wait somewhat for a trip that works for them. Very few (10%) felt the schedule did not work at all. Passengers for which the schedule does not currently align perfectly were asked what time might work better.

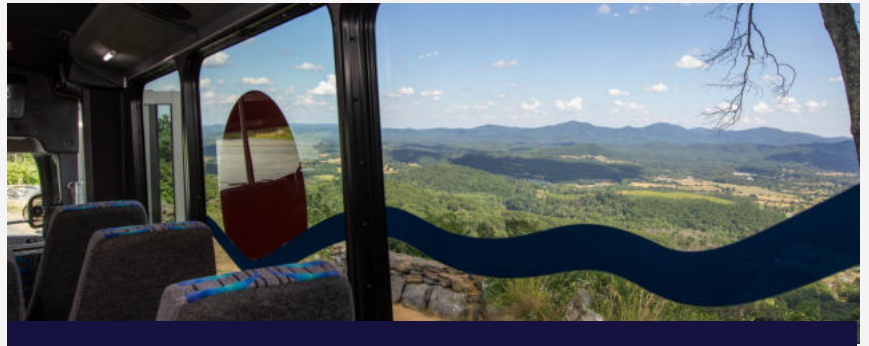
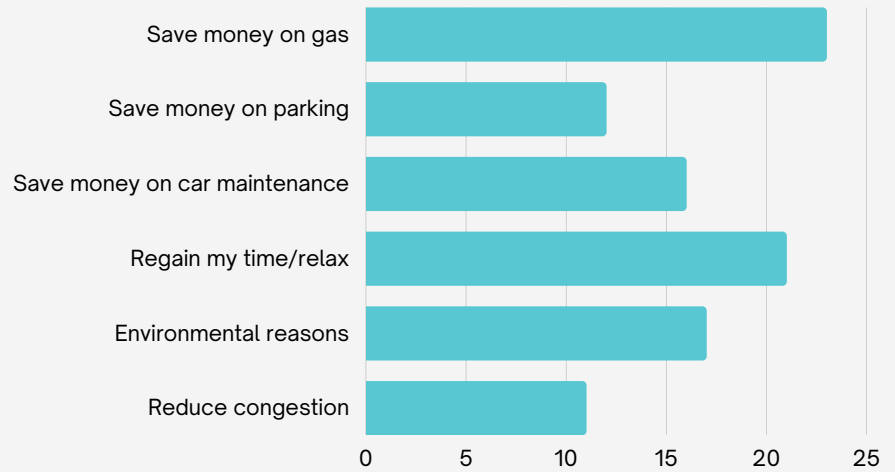
Many noted they would like to arrive closer to 8:00 am, meaning a 7:00 am departure from Staunton would be better than 7:25 am.

Multiple riders requested the Staunton Mall stop be served on every morning trip, not just trips 1 and 3.

Passengers were asked to share their primary reason for riding Afton Express (Figure 4).

Finally, passengers were asked what they enjoy about riding Afton Express and specifically, "What does this service mean to you?" Some of the passenger quotes are provided below.

Figure 4. Reasons for Riding



The Afton Express Bus on Afton Mountain

"This service has been life changing for me. Before Afton Express, my commute was the hardest part of the day. Now it is the most enjoyable. I look forward to seeing mass transit options over the mountain grow."

"It has increased the longevity of me at my job... Commuting to Charlottesville every day from Staunton is awful, at least riding the bus I can sleep or work or make a phone call. I reclaim my commute time."

"I am not having to deal with driving and traffic and can sit back and relax. I arrive at work less stressed. I'm helping the environment by sharing rides with others. I'm not putting extra wear on my vehicle so that saves money."



Next Steps

Afton Express looks to the future and hopes to see continued growth and success. In the second year of operation (spanning FY23 and FY24), the two most notable changes will be 1) a planned expansion of service, and 2) the conversion of funding from a state Demonstration Grant to Section 5311 Formula funding.

The expansion will add a third bus into the rotation to increase frequency of service. With additional stop times in Charlottesville and adding a fifth trip in the evening, Afton Express will be able to serve more commuters with schedules outside of the traditional 9:00 am to 5:00 pm work hours. The planned expansion is designed with UVA healthcare staff in mind; particularly those who work 12-hour shifts. This expanded schedule will go through a public comment period and will go into effect February 1, 2023.

Initial funding for the Afton Express has been provided via a Demonstration Grant funded by the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation (DRPT). The Demonstration Grant provides eighty percent of funding with a twenty percent local match; provided collectively by the Cities of Staunton, Waynesboro, and Charlottesville, Counties of Albemarle and Augusta, and the University of Virginia. Starting in FY24, funding for the service will transition to Section 5311 Formula Grants for Rural areas. The CSPDC will include this grant submission with their regular requests for funding the BRITE service each fiscal year going forward.



The bus at the UVA Hospital Stops - Expanded service to these stops to come in 2023



Acknowledgements

Delivery of this service would not be possible without the Afton Express funding partners. We'd like to make a special acknowledgement to the Cities of Staunton, Waynesboro, and Charlottesville; Albemarle and Augusta Counties, and the University of Virginia for their continued support.

Additional recognition goes to the staff at Virginia Regional Transit (VRT) who operate the service daily, provide the buses and the drivers, and keep our customers coming back each week. Responses to rider surveys never fail to mention the impact the drivers have on their passengers' day. Our riders often comment about the exceptional level of customer service these dedicated Afton Express drivers provide. We also extend gratitude to the CSPDC and consulting staff that worked on the various feasibility studies, and the necessary work leading up to the launch of this new service. Many thanks to Nancy Gourley, Transit Program Manager (now retired) who helped carry this project across the finish line.

Finally, thank you to the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation (DRPT) for assistance in funding operation of this service. The staff at DRPT who review grant requests, and grant program managers who provide support through the application period and beyond to operations and compliance. As well as the elected officials and legislators, both at the local and state level, that continue to show support for public transportation - particularly rural public transportation.



Senator Mark Warner visits the BRITE Bus Transit Facility on July 13, 2022.
Pictured here with CSPDC Executive Director, Bonnie Riedesel,
and Chair of the CSPDC Board of Commissioners, Frank Friedman.

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