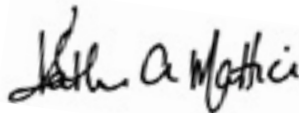


The start of a new year typically means we are keeping an eye on new legislation as Congress and the Virginia General Assembly get to work. This year we are also watching how the administration of President Joe Biden and a Democratically controlled U.S. Senate will impact the fortunes of public transit in America. Metro and transit agencies across the country predict financial pain well into 2022 without additional financial support.

At the state level, we support bills in the General Assembly that would provide one-time financial relief for the city and county governments that pay into Metro. Local governments have been hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic and the money could help them balance their budgets.

Other news featured inside this month's Executive Director Newsletter includes a major update for the Northern Virginia Regional Fare Collection Strategic Plan and how NVTC's transit data work was featured at a national conference. Both are examples of the kind of long-range planning work we do to support transit across Northern Virginia and the Washington region.

The newsletter also reports on important partner updates, including the temporary shutdown of Metro's Blue Line, a new mobile app for VRE and long-range planning for Fairfax Connector, all forward-looking efforts to modernize and make service more attractive for riders.



*Executive Director*



### Inside This Issue

New president brings new federal transportation leadership and hope of more relief for transit	2
Transit equity among social justice issues on the docket for General Assembly Session	3
NVTC supports enhanced and connected train and bus fare collection	4
Regional marketing campaign launches	6
NVTC WMATA Committee hears details of Metro's proposed budget	6
NVTC transit data work highlighted at global conference	7
Arlington Cemetery Station, Blue Line close this month	8
New and improved VRE Mobile app rolls out	9
Fairfax Connector seeks input on Transit Strategic Plan	9

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### Key Dates

- Feb. 2 - NVTC Legislative & Policy Committee
- Feb. 4 - Commission Meeting
- Feb. 17 - Commonwealth Transportation Board
- Feb. 19 - VRE Operations Board
- March 4 - Commission meeting

### New president brings new federal transportation leadership and hope of more relief for transit

The arrival of President Joe Biden’s administration brought immediate transportation-related changes at the top. On the policy side, Biden signed an [executive order](#) that requires masks on “all forms of public transportation.” The order also includes trains, intercity buses and commercial airplanes.



The Senate held Transportation Secretary Nominee Pete Buttigieg’s confirmation hearing the day after the inauguration. Other DOT appointments include Polly Trottenberg as Deputy Secretary of Transportation. She formerly served as New York City’s transportation commissioner. The department also [announced](#) the names of more than three dozen key members of leadership.

In the near term, Biden’s recovery plans include \$20 billion in emergency relief for public transit. The American Public Transportation Association (APTA) called the proposal “vital to the industry’s survival” adding that it “will help prevent massive labor cuts and drastic service reductions.” If Congress agrees, the money could ease severe deficits Metro faces in FY 2022.



Photos: The White House via Facebook; Pete Buttigieg by Gage Skidmore, licensed under Creative Commons

### Transit equity among social justice issues on the docket for General Assembly Session

This year’s Virginia General Assembly kicked off in January with a focus on social justice legislation and the pandemic. The House and Senate each limited the number of bills that legislators could introduce during this 30-day session, forcing members to be more selective about their legislative priorities and reducing the number of bills offered to around 900 compared to nearly 2,000 during a typical short session.

Compared to last year’s Transportation Omnibus Bill, there aren’t any major transportation proposals this year. The onset of the COVID-19 public health emergency prompted the General Assembly to examine how best to reduce the impact of the pandemic on local transit operators during a special session last August. NVTC’s 2021 Legislative and Policy Agenda reflects similar goals. While there are few transportation-related bills, NVTC staff are monitoring bills that address the Commission’s priorities including:

- HB 1931: allows a member of a public body to attend a meeting electronically to provide care for a family member with a medical condition.
- HJ 542: requests DRPT to conduct a two-year study of transit equity and modernization in the Commonwealth.
- SB 1271: allows a public body to meet electronically when a locality in which the public body is located has declared a local state of emergency.

Members have also submitted amendments to the Governor’s budget. NVTC has requested House and Senate budget amendments for one-time funding to support NVTC jurisdictions in paying their Metro commitments. The Session is scheduled to end February 11, but it is expected that Gov. Ralph Northam will call a 16-day special session immediately upon adjournment to give lawmakers more time to work on legislation and the budget.



Photo: Virginia Department of Historic Resources



### NVTC supports enhanced and connected train and bus fare collection

The Northern Virginia Transportation Commission approved the 2021 Northern Virginia Regional Fare Collection Strategic Plan in January. The plan envisions an enhanced and connected train and bus fare collection system across the Washington region. Near term goals support safe fare collection during the COVID-19 pandemic while other parts of the plan look to adoption of emerging technologies to make paying fares easier and improve the potential for attracting new riders.

Since the last Strategic Plan in 2018, there have been notable developments in the region including Metro completing its Fare Payment System Vision and Strategy, expansion of mobile payments and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the pandemic led to the pause in bus fare collection and implementation of safety measures like rear-door boarding and driver barrier doors, the crisis has also spurred innovation and accelerated regional implementation of fare payment technology including rear-door validation and mobile payments.



### Highlights of the 2021 Northern Virginia Regional Fare Collection Strategic Plan

#### In the immediate term NVTC will:

- Work with Metro and regional transit systems on implementation and promotion of the SmarTrip App and mobile wallet as a new self-service payment option. NVTC will also monitor local mobile ticketing activity for ways to minimize regional fragmentation.
- Facilitate the exchange of information between transit systems on their experiences with installation of bus operator barriers, which is viewed by many as a prerequisite to resuming front door boarding and fare collection during the COVID-19 pandemic.

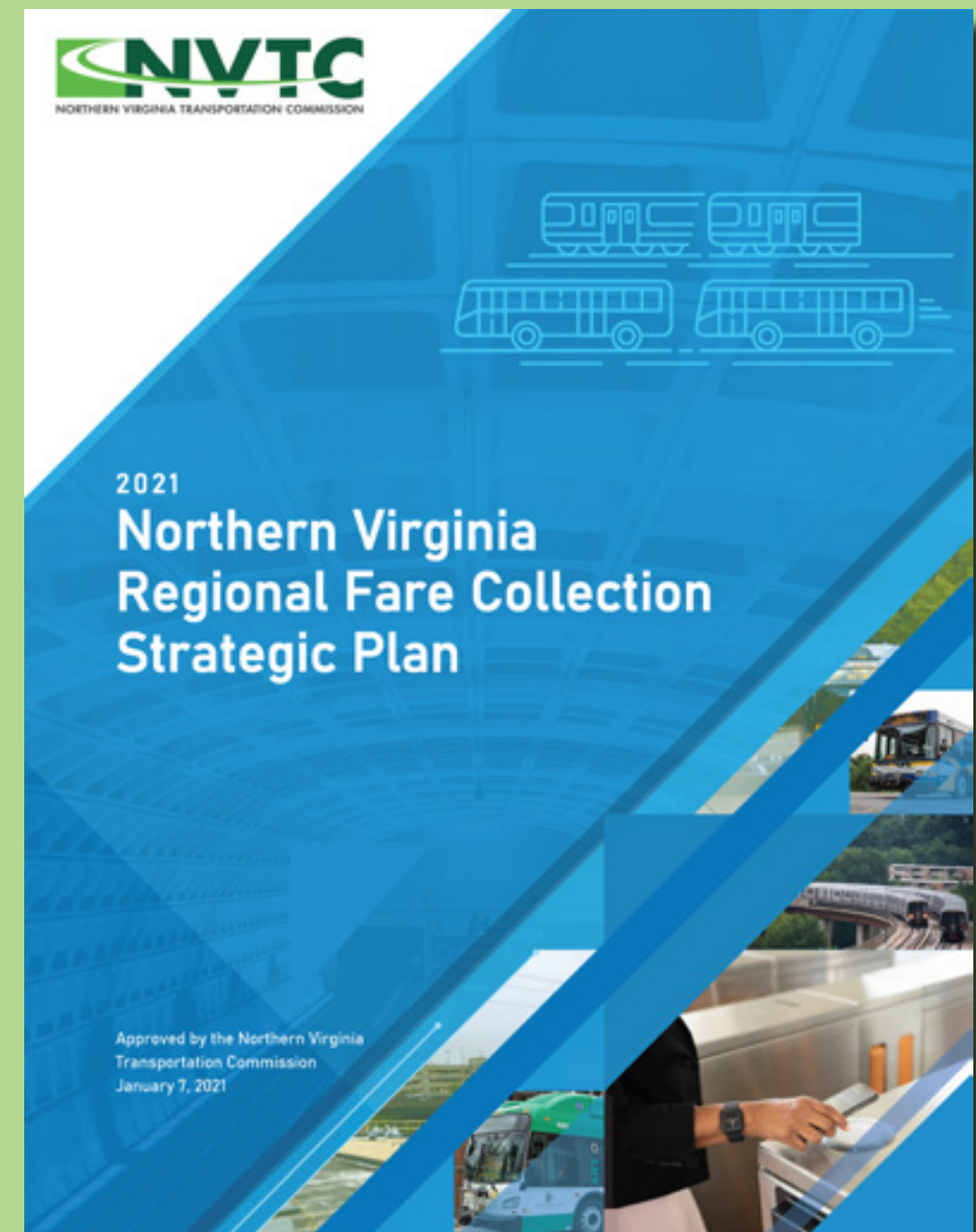
#### In the near term NVTC will:

- Represent Northern Virginia's needs in Metro's project for new bus fareboxes with standalone SmarTrip validators to enable rear-door payment and all-door boarding.
- Support transit systems implementing off-board fare collection solutions for bus rapid transit services. Regional coordination is needed with Metro, other regional partners and vendors for developing solutions that are cost effective and compatible with SmarTrip.
- Participate in planning discussions for regional back office systems upgrades to enable fare capping, as implementation requires technology and policy changes. Fare capping promotes equity and simplifies fares by allowing riders to "pay-as-you-go," automatically issuing a pass after meeting the fare payment equivalent of a daily, weekly or monthly pass.
- Facilitate information exchange between transit systems and Metro on new fare products offerings and programs to attract customers to transit.

#### In the long term NVTC will:

- Represent the transit systems' needs in Metro's planned project to expand the retail network that can be used by customers to load money to fare payment cards or accounts using cash.
- Represent transit systems' needs in planning for contactless open payments, which would enable customers to use contactless bankcards and mobile wallets to pay for transit with a tap of the card or device they already have—just like they can at many retailers.
- Support the integration of Virginia Railway Express (VRE) into the SmarTrip program as part of Metro's transition to a new back office system.
- Work with Metro and transit systems to develop additional features, which will address customer and local transit system needs.

Read the full Strategic Plan update at [novatransit.org](https://novatransit.org).





## Regional marketing campaign launches

A new marketing campaign reminds our region that “public transit is here to get you there.” That’s the tagline for our new regional marketing effort. It can be heard on the radio from WTOP and WAMU and while streaming from devices like Alexa or listening to podcasts. Ads air during traffic and news reports and also during the Kojo Namdi Show on WAMU. The campaign also features online display and social media ads. In addition to Facebook and Instagram, which we used in the first campaign in 2019, we’re adding advertisements on Twitter and LinkedIn. The second wave of the campaign will include video ads. You’ll see those on YouTube, which proved highly successful in our first campaign, and for the first time this year, we’re placing ads on video streaming services, like Hulu.

The advertisements encourage people to go to [novarides.org](http://novarides.org), which has been redesigned. In addition to trip-planning links, the website now includes COVID-19 public transit resources highlighting studies and news reports on how to ride transit safely during the pandemic. DRPT provided a grant to support the campaign with local matches from the cities of Falls Church and Fairfax, Arlington and Fairfax counties, VRE and OmniRide.



## NVTC WMATA Committee hears details of Metro’s proposed budget

NVTC’s WMATA Committee discussed the trade-offs associated with Metro’s proposed FY 2022 budget during its January meeting and committee members provided feedback to staff on themes to include in a letter of comments.

NVTC WMATA Manager Andrew D’huyvetter presented an overview of Metro’s proposed budget, which was revised in mid-January following the passage of the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act which includes \$14 billion for public transit. However, Metro staff continue to project a budget gap in FY 2022, even with the additional federal funding.

The Commission will continue to discuss comments on the budget at the February Commission meeting. At the direction and review of the WMATA Committee Chair, staff will then develop a draft letter of comments that will be referred to the March Commission meeting for action.

The Metro Board will hold work sessions on the proposed budget in February and March. Metro expects to conduct public hearings in March with Board approval coming in April.

Also in January, the Metro Board of Directors approved an amendment to the FY 2021 operating budget. The agency says due to the omnibus COVID relief bill passed in December that it “will be able to increase and therefore, amend its budget enabling the continuation of essential transit service and employment of thousands of transit workers.” Board members also agreed to starting the public comment period for the FY 2022 budget proposal. It’s scheduled to start in February and will consist of six virtual public hearings.

## NVTC transit data work highlighted at global conference

NVTC staff attended and participated in the Virtual 2021 Transportation Research Board Annual Meeting throughout January. The conference, held entirely online, featured new ways to connect such as virtual networking rooms, interactive poster sessions as well as more traditional roundtable discussions exploring innovative practices in transportation planning and policy. Of particular note were technical discussions around the impact the COVID-19 pandemic will have on long-term travel patterns and choices. While many respondents to survey travel choices currently are predicated on their perception of risk or working situation, initial research has shown a high demand for public transportation remains among economically vulnerable groups and with the working from home trend persistent, a growing need for non-commute trip sustainable transportation alternatives in the post-pandemic world. Additionally, the sessions highlight the importance of technology and coordinated transit service planning in preparing our transportation systems to be more resilient for the next pandemic or natural disaster, citing the implementation of contactless fare payment, social distancing and flexible scheduling as some of the strategies that public transportation can be prepared for the return of customers and improve safety and passenger comfort.



Staff were also able to attend focused sessions on new methodologies for transportation planning, policy and management. At the Public Transportation Planning and Development Committee, Dan Goldfarb presented NVTC’s work on transit modeling and planning support for Northern Virginia agencies through its modeling tool, TBEST. Dan and Program Analyst Matt Cheng were able to field questions from professionals around the country about their modeling workflow and give advice to other agencies looking to move towards adoption of a more technical planning infrastructure in their own organizations.



### Arlington Cemetery Station, Blue Line close this month

Arlington Cemetery Station and the entire Blue Line shut down this month as the 2021 phase of Metro's [Platform Improvement Project](#) begins. While just one Metrorail station in Virginia will close, those who live or work south of Rosslyn may have to adjust their travel plans. Shuttle buses will connect Rosslyn, Arlington Cemetery and the Pentagon. Meanwhile, the Yellow Line will service both Franconia-Springfield and Huntington. Regional coordination work designed to minimize disruptions during the construction has been underway for months. NVTC's Matt Cheng, Matt Friedman and Jae Watkins participated in a meeting this week that brought together Metro, local transit providers, Northern Virginia jurisdictions and federal agencies. The shutdown is scheduled for February 13 through May 23 and is the last one planned for Virginia stations.



Map showing Blue Line shutdown and shuttle bus alternatives. Courtesy: Metro

### New and improved VRE Mobile app rolls out

VRE is keeping up with advances in customer service technologies to greatly enhance rider experience with the commuter rail's mobile app. An upgraded version of the app debuted in January. All current VRE Mobile users received a notification to upgrade with step-by-step instructions. Existing tickets will transfer over to accounts in the new version of VRE Mobile. The update contains all the functionality of the current version gets users ready to benefit from features coming in Phase Two. These tools are expected to include:

- Trip Planning Tools
- Real-Time Parking Availability
- Push Notifications (for service alerts, advisories, station updates, and VRE news)
- Amtrak Arrival Information
- The Commuter Connections' Incentrip Reward Program
- Web Portal
- Special Event Ticketing



### Fairfax Connector seeks input on Transit Strategic Plan



The Fairfax County Department of Transportation (FCDOT) wants to [hear from you](#) regarding the ten-year Transit Strategic Plan (TSP) for Fairfax Connector.

While online community input meetings have passed, you can still take an online survey until February 19 to provide your comments on Fairfax Connector bus service throughout the county.

The TSP is a county-wide review of bus service and a plan for future service. The TSP incorporates outreach results from short-term, sub-area studies that are being conducted in: Herndon-Reston; Franconia-Springfield; Centreville-Chantilly-Vienna-Tysons (CCVT); and Huntington (part of the Richmond Highway BRT project).