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## Falls Church to end George bus service amid grim budget forecast

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Falls Church is terminating its local bus service after eight years because of a bleak budget forecast.

The George bus service runs two routes during rush hour between points in the city and the East Falls Church and West Falls Church Metro stations. During its meeting last week, the City Council voted to end the service Sept. 27.



The city's George bus service has been popular among commuters. (Photo Courtesy Of City Of Falls Church)

"There was no readily available means of continuing the service," Falls Church Mayor Nader Baroukh said. "Those are the tough decisions we have to make in a very challenging economic climate."

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Falls Church budgeted \$30,000 to operate the buses for the first three months of the fiscal year, which began July 1. But the city is facing a grim budget forecast and does not have additional money for the service. Officials said they could no longer afford to maintain the aging bus fleet. To cut costs last year, the city transferred operation of the bus service from Metro to Arlington County, raised the fare from 50 cents to \$1 and cut midday service. On July 1, fares rose to \$1.50.

Since the bus service launched, it has been popular among commuters. In a letter to the council, Christine Sorenson, who lives just outside the city limits, said she relies on the bus to get to and from work.

Advertisement "I do not have a car and the GEORGE Bus is the best way to get to the East Falls Church Metro station," Sorenson wrote.

The city pays for the service through a combination of its funds and money from a trust fund that includes gas tax revenue and transit funding from the state. The trust fund is managed by the Northern Virginia Transportation Commission. Dipping further into the trust, which also pays for Falls Church's portion of Metro funding, would result in a \$347,000 shortfall next year.

"We're anticipating that we could potentially be in a deficit," Baroukh said. "That was our worry. You don't know what that exact balance is going to be."

George launched in 2002 as a pilot program with four buses that operated on diesel fuel with reduced emissions. It was financed through grants from the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation, the Virginia Transportation Department and the Federal Transit Administration. Metro operated and maintained the buses. Falls Church began funding George in 2005, and Metro continued to operate the system.

The council considered cutting the West Falls Church route and reducing the hours of the East Falls Church route before making its decision to terminate the bus service.

Vice Mayor David F. Snyder was alone among seven council members when he opposed eliminating the bus service. He said the move could jeopardize funding opportunities.

"It seemed to me they're going to be reluctant to assist us in the future when we abandoned something against pretty strong citizen support," he said. "I thought it was shortsighted."

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