

VIRGINIA

# Amid Yellow Line shutdown, some commuters turn to the river instead

By [Teo Armus](#)

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Melinda Higgins has found a favorite seat for her morning commute this fall: atop the open-air deck of a boat, perched on a metal bench on the stern so she can gaze out at the Potomac River.

“Look! It’s so calm and beautiful,” she said behind big black sunglasses, pointing out the sun rays as they peeked through the clouds on a brisk morning this week. “It’s like a Disney World ride every day.”

A federal employee who works in L’Enfant Plaza, Higgins is among the handful of Alexandria residents who have taken advantage of one underused — and free — way to get to or from downtown D.C. this fall: an early-morning ride on a water taxi.

With the Metro’s Yellow Line completely shut down south of Reagan National Airport, transportation officials in Alexandria and across the region have worked to set up alternatives for the 8,400 riders or so affected on weekdays. They have offered shuttle buses, free rides on the Virginia Railway Express and even temporary membership to bike-sharing programs.

But for Higgins — and a handful of other residents joining her aboard — a crowded train car or busy highway is no comparison to cruising through the river, another option added by planners. The water taxi got her to the Wharf within 35 minutes, dock-to-dock, with scenery to boot.

“On that buoy over there,” she exclaimed, “yesterday, I saw a bald eagle there!”

Thomas Hamed, a transportation planner with Alexandria government, said the city’s efforts to subsidize morning rides to and from D.C. are aimed at winning over commuters like her over.

“The Potomac is one of the most underutilized north-south arterials in the entire DMV region,” said Hamed, who has helped head up the water-taxi plan. “This is an opportunity for us to promote that as an alternative, especially at a time when people are looking for other options.”

Yet it is one that has long eluded officials in the D.C. region, who for nearly a decade have sought to study the viability of regular ferry service with limited progress. This year, with plenty of commuters still teleworking a few days a week — Higgins among them — it is one that may be a harder sell.

Across the top deck on her ride this week, a suit-clad John Cella sat with AirPods in his ears as he cruised to his government law job in Federal Triangle. Another Old Town resident, he initially switched from taking the Yellow Line to VRE during the shutdown but started trying out the water taxi two weeks ago.

He is few and far between, though. While he might be accompanied by a few dozen other commuters on the busiest or nicest mornings, he said, on others there might be just as many crew members as passengers aboard.

“It’s a nice way to start the morning where I’m not waiting on a train platform in the hustle and bustle,” said Cella, 36, who takes a scooter docked at the Wharf to complete his commute. “I’ll miss it once it’s gone, I’ll say that.”

The water taxis, operated by City Cruises DC to ferry around tourists, normally start running at 10 a.m. with additional connections to National Harbor.

## **Wharf-Old Town water taxi route**

Until Blue and Green Line trains can be rerouted to cover some Yellow Line service in Virginia, the city is paying about \$5,500 a week for two additional round-trip rides in the morning rush hour. This service will continue through the Nov. 5 extension of this first phase of the shutdown.

The boat leaves the Wharf at 6 a.m. and 7:20 a.m. and heads back from Old Town at 6:40 a.m. and 8 a.m. Anyone boarding is given a red paper slip that gives them free entry on their commute home later in the day.

Mary Rinaldo, the Mid-Atlantic regional vice president at City Cruises, said that there was more consistent ridership during the Metro shutdown in 2019, when rides to and from Alexandria were covered throughout the summer.

“It’s tough. It’s not a big business right now,” she said. “It’s maybe one of those products where ‘if you build it, they will come.’ But because a lot of people don’t ride, it’s hard for us to do consistently throughout the year.”

In other markets where the company operates — such as New York and Boston — it has been able to partner with transportation agencies to develop robust commuter networks, Rinaldo added.

Many officials in the D.C. area have tried to make the same thing happen locally. A group of local governments, including Alexandria’s, commissioned a consultant’s report in 2014 that found that a daily water taxi service could work on at least four possible routes across the Potomac, Anacostia and Occoquan rivers.

The operating costs would be about \$6.4 million per year — without taking into account several on-land expenses — but short connections between Alexandria, Reagan National Airport, National Harbor and the District had enough demand to make it economically viable.

The Northern Virginia Regional Commission is set to release a market analysis on the prospects of a ferry between the Wharf, Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling and Woodbridge by the end of this month, said Robert Lazaro, the group’s executive director.

Some potential customers, though, don’t need any convincing.

Hamed, the Alexandria planner, said that the boats have generated “strong emotional pull” for some regular riders. “The water taxi is the only subject I have ever presented on where audience members have given me a spontaneous standing ovation,” he said.

It would not come as a surprise if Higgins was one of those.

During the previous shutdown, she and a handful of other Old Town residents ended up bumping into each other on the 8 a.m. water taxi to D.C. so often that they ended up forming a loose club of “boat friends,” who would go to happy hour or grab dinner after their ride home.

Despite the emptier boats these days, she still coordinates sometimes with one of her work colleagues to take their morning meeting together from the boat. (“Oh, they have wifi,” she said. “It’s great.”)

But the evening rides back to Alexandria from the Wharf, she said, may be even better. From her favorite bench, she can see the U.S. Capitol and the Washington Monument at once, lit up by the sunset.