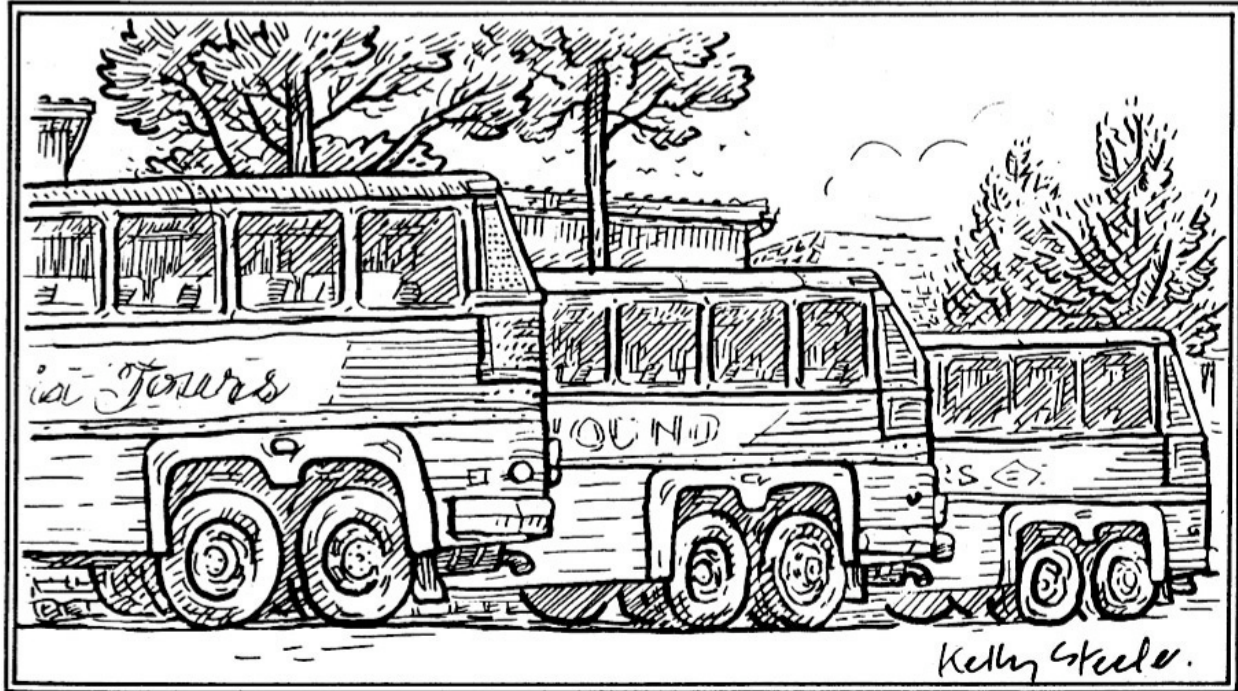


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Motorcoaches and Tourism Policy in Alexandria, Virginia



Old Town Alexandria has long been a popular destination for tourists. A relatively recent and rapidly growing component of this tourism in Old Town is motorcoach traffic. The unregulated growth of this traffic has had many deleterious effects on the Old Town area. Alexandria, like other significant historic residential areas, must regulate this motorcoach traffic. This regulation should be done in conjunction with the development of a tourism policy that is protective of residential interests, is conducive to business interests, and results in a high quality of experience for tourists.



Alexandria Old & Historic District Residents Group
Research Paper

Preface

The origins of this paper date from the summer of 2004 when a number of people in the neighborhood north of Cameron Street got together to discuss the increasing number of motorcoaches appearing in the residential areas. Noting that a task force had been formed by the Alexandria Convention and Visitor Association (ACVA) to study the issue, it was decided that a number of us would attend one of the meetings. It soon became clear that a substantial commitment would be required in that the meetings were generally scheduled during working hours (5:30 pm) and lasted through rush hour. This was an inconvenient time for residents with inflexible work schedules and most could not continue to attend. However, two of us, Rob Aronson and Trish Klingenmaier, decided that we would make every effort to attend each meeting given the importance of the subject.

The structure of the meetings was such that members of the public could only make comments for three minute intervals at the end and so it proved difficult to initiate discussion on topics that were of concern to our neighborhood. Any follow-up on comments at ensuing meetings was not scheduled. Moreover, each participant of the task force was invited solely as an individual and was not representing any group or organization. In the opinion of some, this made consensus difficult to achieve. The membership of the task force, picked by the ACVA, did the best that they could given the nature of the task force.

Many of us who choose to live in Old Town choose to do so out of a love of history and old things. This interest has led many of us to visit other historic cities that have motorcoach policies having direct bearing on the issues being discussed by the task force. It was a disappointment that these policies and regulations were not discussed in detail as there was much that could have been learned. So, out of some sense of dissatisfaction with the discussions, it was decided to conduct our own research and to share our findings with anyone who might find them useful. We have continued to meet to discuss the findings with neighbors and property owners on Cameron, Royal, Pitt, and St. Asaph Streets. Even though it is still in draft form, we feel that this paper is now far enough along to share with others in the City.

The motorcoach issue facing Alexandria is infused with subtle complexities. If it were easy, solutions would already be in the offing. But coming to a solution will be difficult in the absence of good information on the subject. This paper hopes to achieve a new level of understanding that will help move the discussions forward again.

This paper will use the preferred industry term of *motorcoach* (spelled as one word) rather than the more familiar term of *bus* or *tour bus* which can be confusing with regard to vehicle size and function. In 2006, the American Bus Association defined *motorcoach* as “a vehicle designed for long distance transportation of passengers, characterized by integral construction with an elevated passenger deck located over a baggage compartment. It is at least 35 feet in length and carries more than 30 passengers.” These vehicles are indeed unique and the special term is warranted.

The following chapters will investigate the motorcoach problem that Old Town Alexandria is now facing. These chapters examine the current status of the problem and the actions taken by the City of Alexandria to the present. Philosophies regarding motorcoach regulation and tourism planning are discussed. Negative community impacts and costs are also considered. A study of how other cities have coped with these issues is also included. This paper closes with some recommendations, rooted in real practice, which it is hoped will allow a solution to be found for the motorcoach traffic now coming to the Old and Historic District of Alexandria.

AOHDRG

*Rob Aronson
Tom Byrne
Trish Klingenmaier
Richard Klingenmaier*

What's new in this version?

Night Operation. We have noted the expansion of motorcoach night operations within the Old Town residential and historic areas on page I-2 and II-8 (note 7). More of this activity is anticipated with the explosion of the number of ghost tours and the *at night* “Park in Old Town” programs for motorcoaches being put forward by the ACVA. We have included a recommendation in Chapter VII that the operation of all motorcoaches in Old Town be completely banned after dark.

New Motorcoach Regulations in the District of Columbia. Because of the 2007 rule changes in the District, we have updated the Washington DC section in Chapter VI (pages VI-2 thru VI-5 and notes 9 thru 15 on page VI-20). An explanation of the International Registration Plan is included (page III-9 and notes 26 and 27 on pages III-15 and III-16).

George Washington Memorial Parkway Permits. Long overdue in this paper is a study of the permit requirements for motorcoaches on the Parkway. This is introduced on page III-9 and discussed much more fully on pages III-16 thru III-18 in note 28. We began to look at these requirements along with the new regulations in the District (the Clara Barton Parkway, part of the GWM Parkway system, partly exists within the District). Some additional mention is included in the Washington DC section in Chapter VI and in the chapter notes. We are concerned that the permit requirements for accessing the Parkway still appear to be ignored by the motorcoach industry—first noted after the Nov. 2004 motorcoach accident at the Alexandria Avenue bridge.

Safety Issues in the Motorcoach Industry. New in 2007 was the Hearing on Motorcoach Safety at the U.S. House of Representatives called as the result of a number of horrific motorcoach accidents over the previous three years. Criticisms of the industry and of government oversight were heard and new legislation eventually introduced (S.2326) which deals mainly with passenger safety. Other concerns voiced at the hearing remain issues. We have decided to include some of those concerns in the notes section in Chapter V, note 24, pages V-19 thru V-24. There is recognition that safety has not been a priority and is in fact deteriorating at many companies in the motorcoach industry.

New website. In 2008, we put this paper online where it will remain for the foreseeable future. Online distribution defrays much of the time and expense of getting it to those who are interested. Our new email:

oldtownneighbors@comcast.net

and web address:

<http://web.mac.com/datawell/Alexandria/Motorcoaches.html>

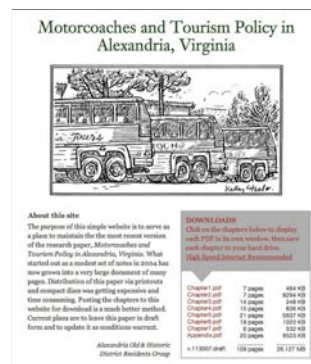


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I. Introduction—The Growth of Motorcoach Tourism in Old Town

Old Town Alexandria is situated on a beautiful site along the Potomac River with a remarkable history and magnificent and extensive historic architectural assets. The residents and city government of Alexandria have long been concerned with the preservation of these assets. In 1946, the Old and Historic District of Alexandria was the third such historic district¹ to be formed in the United States after Charleston (1931)² and New Orleans (1936).³

Both Charleston and New Orleans have become popular tourist destinations largely because of their historic resources. But along with tourism came special challenges that required sensitive and forward-thinking solutions to preserve the attractive assets of these cities. The arrival of significant tourist-based motorcoach traffic was one of the challenges that both Charleston and New Orleans had to face.

In recent years, there has been exponential growth in motorcoach traffic within some residential areas of Alexandria, mainly in the Old and Historic District. Such growth has become a burden for the residents that are recipients of this traffic. Residential areas are targeted for unlimited touring in vehicles that are not designed for these localities. To date, nothing has been done by the City of Alexandria to mitigate this traffic.

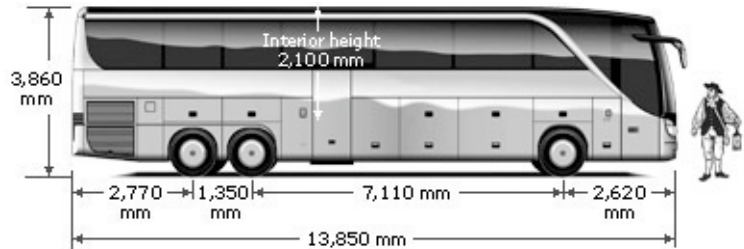
At one time, motorcoach traffic in Alexandria was relatively infrequent and was mostly comprised of visits to specific local venues such as the tour boat businesses, some hotels, or certain restaurants. Some day-tours to Mount Vernon would also include a morning stop at Christ Church because of its association with George Washington. For the most part, the level of motorcoach traffic in Alexandria was tolerable with traffic occurring mainly on arterial streets or the infrequent (but necessary) transiting of residential areas to specific Old Town destinations.

The last few years has seen a major change in both the volume and traffic patterns of motorcoaches within Alexandria. This change is no doubt due in-part to the general increase of tour buses in the Washington DC region. During the high-season which runs from early April through June, it is estimated that motorcoach visits to the District are now exceeding 1,200 per day.⁴ However, the increase in traffic in Alexandria neighborhoods is also due in large part to the increased promotion of Old Town Alexandria to the motorcoach industry. The result is that the motorcoach traffic in Old Town is at such a point that the number of motorcoaches passing a particular location in a residential section of the city can now exceed 50 per day. It is estimated that this is a twelve-fold increase in motorcoach traffic on residential streets from 1996.⁵

It is not just the numbers of motorcoaches coming through Old Town that is of concern, it is also the time of day during which they operate in the city. In the last few years, motorcoaches have been observed transiting the residential streets of Old Town after dark and sometimes late into the night.⁶ Some of this traffic is now unloading and loading passengers at Market Square for Ghost Tours. On a few occasions, motorcoaches have been seen driving on the residential streets as late as the hours of midnight and one o'clock in the morning.

In addition to the late night travels of heavy motorcoaches within residential areas has been the implementation of daily routes through Old Town neighborhoods. Martz Gold Line & Gray Line originates tours at Union Station in Washington DC that include drive-thoughts of Old Town Alexandria neighborhoods on the way to Mount Vernon and elsewhere.⁷ At least three trips per day are scheduled by Martz which, on some days, can grow to at least twice that number. These tours travel the same streets, *repeatedly* exposing the residents along those routes to the negatives that vehicles of such large size bring.

A typical motorcoach will measure over 45 feet long, almost 13 feet high, and over 10 feet wide (with side mirrors). Gross vehicle weights in the vicinity of 27 tons are common. Vehicles of such extraordinary size and weight clearly conflict with the concepts of residential life and the ideals for the preservation of historic areas.



Typical dimensions of a motorcoach operating in the Washington DC area.

In devising solutions to the problems brought on by motorcoaches coming to Old Town, it is useful to look at the experiences of other cities. To use Charleston and New Orleans as preliminary examples, both cities came to recognize that while there are benefits to be had from the tourists that arrive on motorcoaches, there are significant costs to be borne with motorcoach traffic (see Chapter V). Because of these costs, those cities found that it was necessary to enact motorcoach regulations for the protection of city infrastructure, public safety, livability, and ambiance. Many other cities have done the same.

Alexandria stands alone amongst similar cities in not regulating motorcoach traffic to any significant degree, a point not lost on motorcoach operators. This is summed up by the statement made by one motorcoach driver to an Alexandria City Councilman Paul Smedberg when he politely asked a motorcoach driver to move his vehicle that was blocking access to a garage, “The driver had no concern at all, and what he said to me is, ‘Well, I don’t have to move it — they don’t have any rules here.’”⁸

There is a generally recognized concern that the motorcoach traffic in the Old & Historic District of Alexandria is getting out of control. To address the issue, a number of groups have sporadically assembled to discuss the problem and have tried to formulate solutions. One of the most recent groups was formed by the Alexandria Convention and Visitors Association (see Chapter II).

End of Chapter I.

Chapter I Notes

1. Alexandria Convention and Visitor Association website: http://www.funside.com/visitor_timeline.asp
“The Old and Historic District of Alexandria becomes the third historic district in the United States after Charleston and New Orleans.”

2. http://www.preservationsociety.org/program_process.asp

Charleston’s Old and Historic District was created in 1931, the result of the first city zoning ordinance in the nation enacted for the purpose of protecting historic resources. The Society for the Preservation of Old Dwellings, now known as the Preservation Society of Charleston, was instrumental in urging city council to pass this pioneer legislation.

Originally consisting of 138 acres on the lower peninsular, the district has been expanded twice and now includes over 4,800 historic structures. Within the district are architecturally significant structures built between 1712-1945 which are representative of a wide range of architectural styles. The Old and Historic District encompasses much of the core of the historic city which was the center of the city’s civic, social and business life. This area has been designated by the National Park Service as a National Landmark District.

The Old City district is a local historic district located south of Line Street and north of the Old and Historic District.

3. <http://www.cityofno.com/Portals/Portal59/portal.aspx?portal=59&tabid=12>

Legislation for preservation was adopted in 1936 by the Commission Council of the City of New Orleans to create a Vieux Carré Commission. An amendment to the Louisiana Constitution of 1921 (Article XIV, Section 22A) laid the groundwork. This amendment specifically addressed the preservation of the “quaint” traditional architecture in New Orleans' Vieux Carré, the so-called French Quarter, and enabled the creation of a municipal body to safeguard the structures in this old section, which is bounded by Iberville Street, Esplanade Avenue, North Rampart Street and the Mississippi River.

A combination of factors precipitated this early experiment in municipal preservation. Nationally during the 1930s a new concern about the country's historical and architectural heritage emerged. Locally, however, the push for the legal protection of the Vieux Carré began in the 1920s. New Orleans actually ranks as the first city to pass an ordinance which created a historic district. In 1925 the Commission Council of New Orleans, responding to pressure from the local chapter of the American Institute of Architects, established the first Vieux Carré Commission. This first commission faltered, however, because the agency was merely advisory in function. The forthcoming successful 1936 legislation derived from the climate that existed in New Orleans in the 1920s. The efforts of a small group of determined activists during this period insured the continuing preservation of the only intact Spanish and French Colonial settlement remaining in this country.

4. *The District of Columbia Tour Bus Management Initiative (TBMI)* published in 2004 estimated the that number of motorcoaches entering the District can be 1,100 per day during the high season. Factoring in normal tourism growth over the most recent two years, the estimates are that 1,200 motorcoaches now visit the District on some days.
5. Motorcoach counts were conducted in the spring of 2005 and 2006. Forty two motorcoaches were observed passing a residential corner in the city on 2 June 2005. In 2006 on April 8th, April 15th , April 20th, and April 21st, the motorcoach counts exceeded 40 in number and on April 20th, the number counted was 51. There were many other days that seemed just as heavy that were not counted. Long-time residents of Old Town remember that the number of motorcoaches invading the city were much, much less; and although no conscious efforts to count the number of motorcoach transits were made years ago, most of these residents seem to agree that the numbers of

motorcoaches were about four per day during the springtime high season *at the very most*. Long-time residents further agree that on most days during the year, there were none. And there was no late night motorcoach activity—ever.

6. Ibid.

7. Current tours by Martz Gold Line / Gray Line offer views of the “quaint seaport town of Old Town Alexandria. These tours are: Mt. Vernon and Old Town Alexandria, Mount Vernon by Candlelight, Mount Vernon / Washington After Dark Combo, All Day Combination Tour, Two Day Grand Tour.
<http://www.graylinedc.com/tours.asp>

8. **Alexandria officials targeting tour bus parking problems.** Luntz, Taryn. The Examiner. 1 April 2008.

Alexandria officials are struggling with wayward tour buses that clog the city's narrow streets and have a frustrating habit of parking wherever they want.

“We really have to get our arms around this,” Councilman Paul Smedberg said at a recent City Council meeting. “My fear is that ... we're going to have a much higher level of tour buses coming to the city because of National Harbor.”

With its historic buildings and cobblestone charm, Alexandria is a popular destination or lunchtime stopover for tour companies. Residents have long complained that tour buses double-park, block parking garages or idle for hours in front of restaurants, blowing exhaust at outdoor eaters.

Smedberg raised the problem, which the city unsuccessfully tried to solve three years ago by assembling a task force, after he had trouble entering the City Hall parking garage because it was blocked by a tour bus.

“The driver had no concern at all, and what he said to me is, ‘Well, I don’t have to move it — they don’t have any rules here,’” Smedberg told his council colleagues.

Alexandria has a limited number of parking spots for the buses, including two spots in front of City Hall on Fairfax Drive, four spots in a lot on Union and Oronoco streets, and about six spots that buses can rent for the day at the Masonic Temple parking lot.

By comparison, the District of Columbia has more than 700 spots set aside for tour buses near attractions throughout the capital city.

Alexandria will be adding two more bus spots to Fairfax Drive by converting some of its metered spots for the remainder of the busy spring tour season, Deputy City Manager Mark Jinks said.

“It’s a constant challenge for us to cooperatively work with the buses, particularly when we don’t know when they’re coming,” Jinks said.

“There are few options for where they can go,” Councilman Rob Krupicka said. “Without building a place for buses to go that is convenient or efficient, I don’t think we’re really going to solve this issue.”