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COMMUTER

Needs of aging baby boomers will go beyond fare discounts



Dr. Gridlock

By [Robert Thomson](#)

A traveler had a follow-up question about last Sunday's column, in which we discussed the impact of Metro's proposed fare increases on [senior citizens](#).

Dear Dr. Gridlock:

I am surprised that you did not mention the option of the yellow [SmartTrip cards](#) for seniors 65 and over. They have all of the senior discounts built into them and also allow the holders to avoid the paper-ticket penalty. This is one of the biggest bargains in our family budget.

— **Bob MacCallum**, *Charlottesville*

MacCallum is quite right about the value of these cards. Here's the deal:

A few years ago, [Metro](#) introduced a different type of SmartTrip card for people 65 and older. It looks different. It's yellow and says "Senior SmartTrip" on the front. It works like a regular SmartTrip card at the Metrorail fare gates and Metrobus fareboxes. But it automatically applies the senior discount, charging half the regular fare. (That's half the peak-period fare on Metrorail.)

The card costs \$5, just like a regular SmartTrip card. Unlike a regular card, it isn't for sale on [Metro's Web site](#) or at the SmartTrip card-vending machines. Seniors have to show a government-issued photo ID with proof of age when they buy one at Metro sales offices, commuter stores, and some public libraries in Prince George's and Montgomery counties.

The discounts are good for seniors and for Metro, because older riders tend to travel at midday, when the trains and buses are least crowded and draw the least revenue.

[A study released last week](#) by a D.C.-based organization called [TRIP](#) (The Road Information Program) was a reminder about the importance of this age group in the nation's transit programs.

While we talk a lot about Metro's [fare-increase proposals](#) and the [state of the service](#), we don't talk enough about the type of transit system we'll need in the future.

The [baby boomers](#) are now in transit to senior citizen status.

"This aging population will both create and face significant transportation challenges, including a transportation system that lacks many features that would accommodate the level of mobility and safety older Americans desire and expect," the TRIP study said.

Seniors are no different from the rest of the population: They prefer to drive. But that's not always going to be possible for them. It will be in their interest, and the interest of the community at large, to make sure we have a transit system capable of meeting their desire to stay mobile.

That's an ambitious task for governments and community leaders, one that goes far beyond senior cards, fare discounts, and priority seating on trains and buses. "Transit systems can be improved to better accommodate older Americans as well as the population at large," the TRIP study said.

Among its recommendations: Ensure that public-transit vehicles, facilities and stops are easily accessible for elderly or disabled passengers; expand bus and other transit routes; and create innovative alternatives tailored to the needs of older people, such as ride-sharing systems, volunteer driving programs and door-to-door community transportation services.

Metro does many good things to accommodate older people, but it still puts up barriers. The out-of-service elevators and escalators that are annoying but endurable to younger people can lead to outright rejection of the transit option among those more aware of their frailties. Meanwhile, some seniors heading for [Washington's cultural attractions](#) will drive right past the Metro garages because they don't expect to find a midday parking space.

Metro will need to enhance its offerings and become more flexible with its services to accommodate this coming generational change.

To read previous Dr. Gridlock columns, go to [washingtonpost.com/gridlock](#). Dr. Gridlock also appears Thursday in Local Living. Comments and questions are welcome and may be used in a column, along with the writer's name and home community. Write Dr. Gridlock at The Washington Post, 1150 15th St. NW, Washington, D.C. 20071 or e-mail drgridlock@washpost.com.