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Metro Columnist

## Even Montgomery agrees: Life looks brighter in Fairfax

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I knew Fairfax County had lower taxes than Montgomery. I knew it had more jobs. I even knew it had higher SAT scores. But shorter commutes? In Northern Virginia, a locale synonymous with "clogged roads"? Was that possible?

Apparently it is. A study released last week disclosed that the average Montgomery resident takes 32.9 minutes to get to work, or 2.4 minutes more than his or her counterpart in Fairfax.

That's just the start. The data-packed survey, commissioned in a burst of masochism by Montgomery's own County Council, contains page after page of statistics pointing to Fairfax's advantages over its longtime rival across the American Legion bridge.

Jobs in Fairfax pay more, on average, than those in Montgomery. Fairfax's rate of serious crimes is nearly a third lower. Its houses are newer. It has safer drivers: Traffic fatalities per capita are almost twice as frequent in Montgomery.

This is all pretty unnerving for someone like me, who grew up in Montgomery County and lives there now (in Bethesda). My narrow-minded parochial side would like to ignore it or explain it away. But this column takes a regionwide perspective, so if we have to pick, then I acknowledge squarely that Fairfax is Top Suburb.

Why does anybody care? Mainly because of the competition to attract jobs. Montgomery council member George L. Leventhal (D-At Large) ordered the study in hopes of pushing his county to copy some of Fairfax's business-friendly practices. "So many people [in Montgomery] ask me: How does Fairfax do it? Why is Montgomery's budget bigger than theirs? Why are their taxes lower?" Leventhal said.

In an example of what's at stake, Montgomery and Fairfax are going head-to-head to become the new home of giant defense contractor Northrop Grumman. (Fairfax has the advantage of being closer to the Pentagon.)

It's also about bragging rights and people's natural interest in comparing themselves with their neighbors.

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As the area's largest and most affluent jurisdictions, Fairfax and Montgomery each measure their performance against the other's. The region's third-largest suburb, Prince George's County, compares itself to Montgomery, but the interest is not returned. None of the suburbs compares itself to the District, which is both urban and unique as the nation's capital. (I'm leaving out Loudoun, Arlington and others because they're smaller.)

As the very existence of the study shows, Montgomery is developing what County Council member Marc Elrich (D-At Large) aptly described to my colleague Michael Laris as "Fairfax envy."

This marks a considerable change in thinking from when I was growing up in the 1960s and 1970s. Then, we took for granted that Montgomery was No. 1. We were right on Washington's border, whereas people in Northern Virginia had to cross bridges to get to work. Sadly, some in Montgomery wrote off Fairfax residents because they were . . . Southerners.

"During the '60s and '70s, Fairfax was the poor sister to Montgomery. That's all changed," said former U.S. congressman Tom Davis (R-Va.), who represented the 11th District, including most of Fairfax.

"We used to be the southern side of the tracks. When you talk about the elites in the town, they all used to live in Chevy Chase and Bethesda, then Potomac [in Montgomery]. Great Falls, McLean, Oakton and Clifton [in Fairfax] were kind of overlooked," he said. "For a long time, we were kind of an undiscovered gem. Then everybody started moving out here."

Rep. Gerald E. Connolly (D-Va.), who succeeded Davis in the U.S. House seat, said, "Clearly in some key indices Fairfax has surpassed Montgomery, probably to the surprise of folks who live on the other side of the river."

In Montgomery, Leventhal agreed that Fairfax has shed a past reputation as being less sophisticated. "It is certainly true nowadays that if I want to take my wife to a four- or five-star restaurant . . . there are a lot more of them in Tysons than in Bethesda. Fairfax has become high-end," he said.

Of course, from a national perspective, the two counties are virtually indistinguishable. Both are very prosperous, with excellent schools and public services. For example, out of more than 3,000 counties in the nation, per-capita personal income in Fairfax ranks 14th. Montgomery places 15th.

"It's a tale of two great counties. . . . We're far more alike than we're different," Montgomery County Council President Nancy Floreen (D-At Large) said.

The study showed that Montgomery boasts an edge in some categories. It has more parkland and open space. Its population has grown much faster since 2000, and it has a lower home foreclosure rate. For now, it has more Metrorail stations, although Fairfax is catching up with construction of the Silver Line to Dulles Airport.

Nevertheless, the survey so favored Fairfax overall that the county will surely use the data against Montgomery in trying to lure business. For just that reason, Leventhal acknowledged, the office of Montgomery County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) was unhappy about the initiative.

Although it's always best to know the facts, I regret that the competition risks weakening regional solidarity. It's vital for our area to cooperate on issues including transportation, the environment and public safety.

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Also, as one wag said, regardless of the survey's ultimate impact, for Montgomery the whole exercise feels like calling in an artillery strike on one's own position.

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