



EMPLOYER PROFILE

A JOB IN THE SUBURBS AND A LIFE WITHOUT A CAR: THE APPLIED PHYSICS LABORATORY MAKES IT POSSIBLE

Pictured Above: A MARC commuter rail train pulls into the Laurel station. From this station, APL employees can use a new shuttle service to get to their jobs on the APL campus.

With more than 20 buildings, 453 acres of land, and roughly 7,000 employees, Johns Hopkins University's Applied Physics Laboratory (APL) sprawls across a suburban landscape in Laurel, Maryland, roughly halfway between Washington, DC and Baltimore. Home to more than 600 research programs for the Department of Defense, the National Security Agency, and other government agencies, APL relies on its highly educated workforce to carry out research essential to national security. In recent years, APL administrators noticed that attracting in-demand employees to a location far from public transportation was becoming a heavier lift. "A number of younger staff don't even want to own a vehicle, let alone drive to work," says APL's Campus Development Manager Brian Cornell, "and one thing they're weighing in their job choice is the lifestyle factors, like whether they would need a car."

What does an employer like APL do, when faced with this kind of challenge? "We looked at it as a management and leadership issue," Cornell says. "We had to figure out what our employees' wants and needs were, and then we had to figure out how to build programs that effectively address those needs." APL worked with GoHoward, Howard County's commuter services agency to distribute a commuter survey to all of its employees, asking about demographics, commute choices, and what other options employees would consider for getting to work. They wanted their employees to think carefully about why they choose the commute options they do and what they would need to make other choices.

The survey garnered roughly 1,600 responses, which fell into three distinct buckets. Those living closest to the APL campus, mostly residents of the suburban communities in between Baltimore and DC, were most willing to try carpooling. Those living further out, particularly those living in Baltimore City and DC proper, were most willing to try public transportation, while those living the furthest out were most willing to try vanpooling.

Over the course of six months, in the summer and fall of 2019, APL introduced three pilot programs to offer alternatives to driving alone for their employees. In June, they established a carpooling pilot with Waze Carpool, a ride-matching app offered by Google that allows commuters to connect with each other and share rides to work. Waze provided APL its own dedicated user group, allowing APL employees to seek out specifically from their co-workers. In October, APL began providing a shuttle service to and from the Laurel MARC commuter rail station, with shuttles timed to meet arriving trains in the morning and departing trains in the afternoon. In November, APL started a vanpool program in partnership with Enterprise. All three of these pilots are scheduled to run through the summer of 2020: APL gets well over a hundred college interns every summer, many of whom don't have access to an automobile, so Cornell and his team expect these alternatives to be particularly useful to that group.

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A key consideration for APL was finding ways to meet these transportation needs that could be maintained and promoted without overtaxing the organization’s capacity to provide them. “That’s why the [carpool and vanpool] services provided by Waze and Enterprise appealed to us,” Cornell says. “These companies help us administer the programs, and a lot of the work is done for us by apps and social media.” APL staff particularly enjoy the dashboard provided by the Waze app, showing the amount of trips, miles, and greenhouse gas emissions saved by the program. “We’re a metrics-focused organization, so people really like seeing those numbers,” Cornell says.

While APL has promoted these programs through their twice-weekly all-staff emails, and through LCD screens posted in its building lobbies and cafeterias, it has found the most effective way to spread the word about these options is word of mouth. Says Cornell, “We’re trying to figure out how we can better get this information out to people. Parking is a frequent topic of conversation among employees and we’re trying to change that conversation to highlight these other options.”

APL has been very pleased with the success of these programs to date. The carpool program has been the most popular, with more than 500 employees downloading the app, and the number of carpools arranged through the app doubling every month. Direct feedback from employees has also been very positive: “People are telling us that they can reduce the number of cars their family owns as a result of these programs, and they really like not having to worry about traffic or parking,” says Cornell. “It’s given people a little bit more freedom to make transportation choices based on their lifestyle.”

Cornell cites several other benefits of these programs for APL, including improved employee morale and increased productivity. “When you’re coming in to the office ready to work, and not frustrated about traffic or parking, you’re more productive,” he says. He encourages organizations looking at commuter benefits programs to focus on their employees’ needs, and to stay patient. “You’re not going to get a thousand people using these programs on the first day. You need to nurture these programs and keep promoting them.”