



## D.C. braces for record inauguration crowd

By Traci Watson, USA TODAY  
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WASHINGTON — The inauguration of Barack Obama will go down in history as the first time an African American assumes the presidency. It could also make history of a less pleasant kind as millions of people flood the capital city to witness the event.

Washington officials, including Mayor Adrian Fenty, say they are bracing for as many as 5 million people to watch Obama take the oath of office in front of the Capitol on Jan. 20.

The Secret Service says the crowds won't be nearly that big, but even half that number would smash the record set in 1965 when 1.2 million people turned out to watch Lyndon Johnson be sworn in.

The crowds are likely to overwhelm the roads around the nation's capital and the subway system. The vast gathering is also likely to strain law enforcement resources.

People should know "what they're in for," says Washington Deputy Mayor Dan Tangherlini. "It's going to be a day of walking and a day of watching and a day of waiting as well as a day of celebration and ceremony."

The waiting and watching won't be made any easier because of Secret Service restrictions. The rules vary, depending on the location, but parade-goers will have to do without bicycles, backpacks, coolers, thermal containers and chairs, even though they are allowed to bring those items to the National Mall area.

Signs or placards will be allowed at the Inaugural Parade — but they must be made of cardboard, poster board or cloth and they cannot be more than 3 feet by 20 feet or thicker than one-quarter inch. It's the time of year when daytime temperatures in Washington are in the 30s, and some worry that frail older visitors could suffer more than inconvenience.

"A lot of people, especially from the South, don't have real heavy coats," says Charlie Fisher of James Lee Witt Associates, an emergency-management consulting firm. "Let's hope for a bright sunny day."

At least bad weather would reduce the size of the crowd.

Excitement over the inauguration is running so high that hotels in places such as Delaware and southern Pennsylvania — at best more than a two-hour drive from Washington — are filling up fast. In a poll of metropolitan Atlanta residents sponsored by a local TV station, 12% of those surveyed said they plan to attend the inauguration.

**Many people plan to stay overnight in distant cities such as Pittsburgh and catch charter buses to Washington early on the morning of Jan. 20, says Peter Pantuso, president of the American Bus Association. Thousands of charter buses will converge on the city, in addition to an untold number of church vans, school buses and other group vehicles. The city is still working out where to put all those buses.**

Officials want to park as many as possible within walking distance of the National Mall. Passengers would hoof it to the Mall, where giant TV screens will show the ceremony.

The city's definition of walking distance: 1 to 3 miles.

That route might be quicker than taking Washington's subway, which will offer rush-hour service for an unprecedented 17 hours straight on Jan. 20.

Even so, trains will be packed and waits for trains could stretch for hours. A single emergency or breakdown will ripple through the system and make delays worse, says Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority spokeswoman Candace Smith.

"We're going to carry as many (visitors) as we can. We can't carry all of them," she says. "Quite honestly, the best seat is going to be in front of the television."

The roads also will be under pressure. Four of the major bridges leading into the city will be completely or partially closed to private vehicles, and lanes on major streets will probably be reserved for buses.

"After events are over, you're going to have huge traffic jams," warns Lon Anderson of AAA Mid-Atlantic. "It's going to be transportation pandemonium."

One group will be happy about the influx of people: pickpockets.

Both Smith and Kristopher Baumann, chairman of the D.C. Police Union, say the masses of out-of-towners are likely to draw thieves looking to take advantage.

Baumann is also worried that despite the city's intent to import an extra 4,000 police officers, the crowds will have the upper hand.

The glut of visitors will "put an enormous strain" on law enforcement, he said, while a decision by City Council to allow bars and clubs to stay open longer "is just a recipe for disaster" because there are too few officers to keep a close watch on revelers.

Metropolitan Police Department spokeswoman Traci Hughes said that the extra law-enforcement officers from out of town would free local police to patrol the city. She also said the police were prepared to keep watch over nightspots even before the hours were extended.

Minor frustrations and inconvenience won't have any lasting effects for Obama himself, says David Lewis, a political scientist at Vanderbilt University, who wrote a book called *The Politics of Presidential Appointments: Political Control and Bureaucratic Performance*. But violence or major disruptions could tarnish the start of his term.

"There is a window at the beginning of a presidency when the news is largely positive," Lewis said. "It could have serious consequences ... if he has to respond to other things that take away the feeling of good will." *Contributing: Thomas Frank and the Associated Press*