
Cities Take Different Approaches to Congestion

Traffic Solution: To Build or Not to Build?

By NED POTTER

- This, if you'll pardon the expression, is a tale of two cities: Las Vegas, the metropolis that bloomed in the desert -- and now, in the view of many of its residents, is blooming too quickly for its own good. And West Palm Beach, Fla., a city that was dying, partly because of its traffic patterns, and is now coming back.

The sun shines brightly on both towns, but that is about all they have in common. They have taken almost opposite approaches to their traffic problems.

Las Vegas: The Fertile Plain

Las Vegas actually means "fertile plain" in Spanish -- an ironic name for a desert city that it is paying residents to rip out their front lawns. It is, however, so full of promise to so many people that the number of cars registered there grows by 100 a day.

"Some people joke that we have changed our state mascot to the crushed orange traffic cone because of all the construction that we have in this community," said Jacob Snow, general manager of Southern Nevada's Regional Transportation Commission.

"Congestion, in a tourism-based economy like Las Vegas, is something that we decided we're not going to let stifle our economic growth."

The regional government is trying every alternative to adding highways. Among other things, it has spent \$20 million on a rapid-transit system.

It is also being very careful about growth patterns, trying to make sure it escapes the pattern where businesses are concentrated in a downtown, and residents have endless

commutes from distant suburbs. Mixing work and residential areas means shorter commutes.

But as the cars keep crowding in, laying pavement to handle them has to remain a top priority.

"We know we can't pave our way out of congestion," said Snow, "but we are really in a quandary if we stop paving."

West Palm Beach: Downtown Renewal

Urban areas find themselves in a very difficult position. Many traffic engineers complain that every time they widen a highway, more cars just come to clog it.

But West Palm Beach tried an opposite approach: Instead of adding pavement, it tore it out.

West Palm Beach is very different from Las Vegas, and nobody there suggests their solutions would apply to southern Nevada. But the city did break with prevailing wisdom about how to handle traffic.

Instead of growing, it was dying -- partly because widened roads, meant to ease congestion, made the town a terrible place for pedestrians. People moved out if they could afford to. Those who couldn't had to dodge drug pushers and prostitutes if they went downtown.

Traffic patterns, of course, were only one part of the city's decline. But they were a major part of the city's renewal.

"I think congestion is actually a good thing," said Ian Lockwood on a drive around town. "All the best cities in the world have congestion, and if they weren't congested they wouldn't be great places."

Lockwood, now a private consultant, was transportation manager of West Palm Beach for five years. During his tenure, the city took four-lane, one-way boulevards and shrank them to two-lane streets.

They added trees, speed barriers, cobblestones -- basic ingredients of what designers call "traffic calming." The idea is to slow the maximum speed of cars through a town, and make it friendlier to people on foot or bicycle.

Traffic calming often has a surprising effect. It slows cars down, but it does not necessarily lengthen the time it takes them to get to their destinations. They speed less, but they also stop less. They no longer race to the next stop light.

And since the cars are less threatening, pedestrians come out again. They buy things from downtown shops and eat in open-air restaurants, which adds to the local economy.

"We need the cars, we need the on-street parking -- we need all that, but we need to control that," said Lockwood. "There's definitely congestion going on here, but I don't think anybody minds. It's 'cause it's a nice place. People don't mind congestion in nice places."