
Nation's Traffic Problems Getting Worse

Nation's Traffic Problems Getting Worse Faster Than They Can Be Fixed, Even in Small Cities

The Associated Press

Sep. 7, 2004 - The nation's traffic problems are getting worse faster than they can be fixed even in small cities like Brownsville, Texas, and Pensacola, Fla.

And in the 85 biggest U.S. cities, snarled traffic is costing travelers 3.5 billion hours a year, up from 700 million two decades ago, according to the Texas Transportation Institute's annual Urban Mobility Report released Tuesday.

Also, a solution to ever-growing traffic jams isn't likely to come soon, transit and highway advocates say.

The American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials estimates it would take federal spending as great as \$400 billion over the next six years to solve traffic problems, according to a 2002 study.

"We just aren't keeping pace," said John Horsley, AASHTO's executive director. "Our capacity improvements new highways or transit are growing at 10 percent the rate needed."

Congress, though, is likely to approve billions less than what highway and transit advocates say is required.

The House has agreed to \$299 billion over the next six years. The Senate approved \$318 billion, but Senate sponsors say President Bush probably will approve a more recent proposal of \$301 billion.

While lawmakers wrangle, federal spending remains stuck at the rate it has been for the past six years \$218 billion.

"We need action now," said William Millar, president of the American Public Transportation Association. "Congestion is only getting worse."

Using data from 1982 to 2002, the Texas Transportation Institute, part of Texas A&M University, measured just how much worse it is getting.

Over that period, the study recorded the greatest leap in congestion in Dallas, from 13 hours annually in 1982 for the average peak-period traveler to 61 hours annually in 2002, and in Riverside, Calif., from nine hours annually per rush-hour traveler in 1982 to 57 hours on average in 2002.

The average urban commuter was stuck in traffic 46 hours a year in 2002, a 187 percent increase over the 16 hours lost in 1982.

In 54 cities, traffic jams increased 30 percent faster than roads could be built to alleviate them.

Federal Highway Administration chief Mary Peters said part of the problem is that the main source of road money the federal gasoline tax was designed to create the interstate highway system in the 1950s. Under that system, every state gets part of the federal dollars collected.

"We're not necessarily applying money where we need to relieve congestion," Peters said. "We can't say to the Montanas and the Wyomings of the world, 'You're not important.'"

Peters said new ways of paying for roads and transit systems need to be found. The Bush administration is promoting user fees, such as those that would charge motorists to drive in less-congested lanes during rush hours.

Another proposal to solve traffic problems in the short-term is to manage traffic flow better, Peters said.

Tim Lomax, the report's author, said Tampa, Fla., is a good example of a city that has eased traffic in ways other than building roads. Like many cities, it has coordinated its traffic signals, smoothed traffic flow on major roads and created teams to respond quickly to accidents. Such programs have reduced traffic delays in Tampa by 7 percent, or 3.2 million hours a year.

The report is based on data from the states and the Transportation Department.