



CASCADE POLICY INSTITUTE

CASCADE COMMENTARY

January 2002

No. 2002-02

Summary

TA report from the Portland city auditor's office shows traffic congestion continues to top the list of residents' livability concerns. Instead of seeking to solve the problem, however, city officials have implemented transportation policies that have made congestion worse.

Word count: 714

“The reason so little revenue is spent on roads is that neither the city council nor the Metro council wants to solve the congestion problem; they actually want to make it worse!”

City officials don't want to solve congestion

By John A. Charles

The fact that Portland City Auditor Gary Blackmer's annual report singles out rising traffic congestion as a problem should not be a surprise to anyone; public opinion polls for the past decade have consistently shown the same results. What's surprising is that some people actually think that city commissioners care about it. They don't.

In 1992 Metro commissioned a public opinion poll as part of the 2040 planning project. The survey found 17 percent of respondents considered traffic congestion the number one livability problem—making congestion the top issue of that poll.

In May 2001, Metro paid for another poll that found traffic congestion was once again the top issue, but this time it was cited by 25 percent of respondents. Now the city auditor finds that 43 percent of residents believe that traffic congestion on major streets and thoroughfares in Portland is “bad” or “very bad.”

The response from transportation Commissioner Charlie Hales' office is predictable: the city needs more money. However, the Auditor's report shows that capital spending on transportation was 171 percent higher in 2001 than it was ten years ago.

The problem isn't lack of money. Rather, it's that the city has squandered huge sums on expensive boondoggles that do nothing to improve traffic, such as the downtown trolley (\$57 million) and the East Bank Esplanade (\$30 million). More than 99 percent of all trips (by car, bus, bike and pedestrian) rely on roads, yet the number of lane miles of Portland streets increased only one percent over the past five years.

The reason so little revenue is spent on roads is that neither the city council nor the Metro council wants to solve the congestion problem: they actually want to make it worse! Increased congestion was consciously built into Metro's 2040 plan when it was adopted 5 years ago. The plan projects an increase in the number of congested roadway miles in the region from 187 in 1994 to 562 by 2015—a 200 percent increase in traffic.

Not only are Portland officials refusing to build necessary new roads, they are dismantling the existing roadway infrastructure. For example, North Interstate Avenue has been transformed from a bustling, 4-lane arterial to a desolate wasteland thanks to Tri-Met's light-rail construction, which entails the permanent loss of two lanes. Businesses are going bankrupt and traffic has increased on all nearby parallel routes.

Roads are also being downsized through the city's steady conversion of auto lanes to bikeways. This has already happened on NE Broadway, North Vancouver, and numerous other streets throughout the city, and local planners now want to take away a lane of the Morrison Bridge as well. Yet the city has done no analysis to determine who uses these bike lanes, or whether they are even used at all. In fact, city officials do not even know how many miles of roads have been lost to bike paths.

"A few planners have stopped trying to ease traffic congestion," discovered *All Things Considered* reporter Steve Inskeep in 1997. "Instead, they're embracing congestion. They want to create more of it. Several cities are experimenting with making streets narrower, so traffic moves more slowly. It's called *traffic calming*." Traffic calming involves reducing the number of lanes, adding curb extensions to limit right turns, building concrete median strips to limit left turns and other options. Major routes that have been "calmed" include NE Martin Luther King, NE Broadway and parts of Sandy.

What possible motivation would city officials have to increase traffic congestion? Perhaps it's the pervasive auto-hostile attitude that has infected today's urban planners. Apparently city officials think that if traffic gets bad enough more people will be forced out of their cars and ride light rail or use those bike lanes.

It's not as if local planners don't know how to solve the traffic problem. Metro, ODOT, and a consortium of local jurisdictions spent three years studying congestion through the Traffic Relief Options Study. This analysis showed that we could increase regional highway speeds by at least 54 percent simply by changing the way we price highways.

Members of the public have repeatedly said that they are sick of the worsening traffic in Portland. It's time for local leaders to stop making excuses, and begin listening to the will of the people.

John A. Charles is environmental policy director at Cascade Policy Institute, a Portland, Oregon think tank. The Traffic Relief Options Study final report is online at www.metro.dst.or.us/transpo/tros/tros.html.

“Not only are Portland officials refusing to build necessary new roads, they are dismantling the existing roadway infrastructure.”

Attention editors
and producers

Cascade Commentaries are provided for reprint in newspapers and other publications, with credit given to author(s) and Cascade. Contact Cascade to arrange print or broadcast interviews on this commentary topic. Electronic text files are available online at www.cascadepolicy.org/cctext/.

Please contact:

Angela Eckhardt
Director of Publications
Cascade Policy Institute
813 SW Alder Street, Suite 450
Portland, Oregon 97205

Phone: (503) 242-0900
Fax: (503) 242-3822

www.cascadepolicy.org
angela@cascadepolicy.org