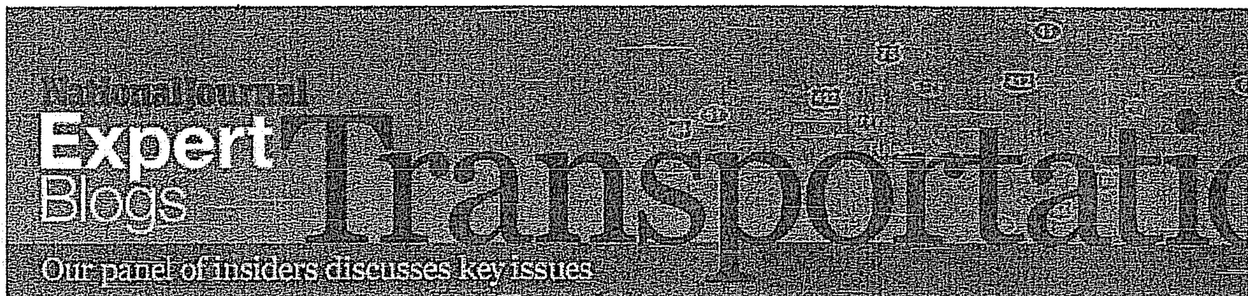


Monday, September 26, 2011

Traffic, Anger, and Political Action

By Fawn Johnson

Correspondent, National Journal

Everyone can relate to traffic congestion; and opinions on it are close to universal. People hate it. Traffic isn't like ozone rules, abortion, or even seat-belt laws, where it's fair to say there are at least a few varying attitudes. One would think, then, that it would be easy to harness Americans' ritual anger at traffic jams to compel policymakers to do something about it.

Unfortunately, it's not that simple. Frustrated drivers aren't an organized constituency, despite their high blood pressure. Lawmakers and administration officials emphasize job creation or safety when they talk about transportation and infrastructure investment. The industry groups that are impacted by those decisions follow suit by focusing on the funding mechanisms for highways, bridges, railways, and airports. The annoyance of a series of brake lights on I-66 in Virginia is largely left out of the conversation.

Yet there is a lot of data about traffic that theoretically could be turned to political use. The Texas Transportation Institute is scheduled to release its annual urban mobility report this week. TTI said the cost of congestion was $115 billion in 2009. IBM recently released a study showcasing commuter pain, finding that 69 percent of drivers said that traffic negatively affected their health through increased stress, lack of sleep, anger, respiratory problems, or traffic accidents.

Traffic woes appear to be a minor, even nonexistent, motivator for lawmakers to set national transportation policies or promote infrastructure spending. Why? Is it risky for politicians to promise that a highway bill or an appropriations increase will ease traffic? Is traffic considered a local issue rather than a national one? Should traffic jams play a role in advocacy campaigns for infrastructure investment? If all lawmakers had to drive themselves to work, would that make a difference in how they view transportation policy?

It's All About Who Feels the Pain

By Robert L. Crandall

Retired Chairman and CEO, AMR and American Airlines

This is a great question, which underscores the disconnect, common throughout society, of problems that impact a great many but have no focused constituency and problems that impact relatively few but have a closely focused constituency. The former problems tend to be ignored, while the latter get solved.

Traffic congestion is a fine illustration, as is food safety. Traffic congestion impacts almost everyone, wastes enormous amounts of energy and costs the economy vast amounts when measured by lost productive time. I think almost everyone cares deeply about food safety. But because there is no way for individual citizens to focus on how to reduce traffic congestion, and because the mechanics of how to assure food safety are not part of most people's daily life, politicians ignore both.

These problems exist primarily because we have no integrated planning mechanism. Congress recently passed a major change to the food safety laws, which those in Congress opposed to regulation regard as overreaching. In the current climate, that has made it easy for Congress to reduce funding for the FDA below what is needed to properly administer the new program. Few citizens know anything about the matter, and it is likely to lie dormant until the next food crisis, at which time there will be much finger pointing about who is at fault.

The same can be said about traffic congestion. Energy independence and more jobs are high on the list of national goals, and both would be advanced by increasing gasoline taxes and using the proceeds to better fund repairing and expanding our highway system. Unhappily, since there is no plan to accomplish those goals, and because there is lots of ideological opposition to raising taxes on anything, the problem of traffic congestion gets less attention than issues which are easier to reduce to ideological slogans.

One way to attack the problem is to expect the Secretary of Transportation to create a plan and articulate the penalties associated with failing to implement it. It we had a plan which compared the cost of time wasted and excess energy consumed with the cost of fixing the problem, the issue of whether or not to invest in our infrastructure would be thought of quite differently. The average citizen has no way of knowing how his or her individual inconvenience is mirrored in the country as a whole, and since the Administration does little or nothing to highlight the problem, and makes no effort at all to deal with energy independence, it's difficult for Mr. and Mrs. America to focus his or her representatives on getting the problem fixed. So we get bogged down in discussions about "government spending" which have very little to do with the issue of what we

should be investing to achieve energy independence and avoid the costs associated with excessive congestion.

One excellent way to solve the problem would be to compel every member of Congress to drive themselves and to require those living within 500 miles of Washington to commute to their home districts by road. Doing so would allow us to sell a large number of vehicles and reduce the number of government employees, thus making a contribution to the effort to cut government spending. It would also underscore for "our representatives" the importance of better planning and the huge energy and time losses associated with traffic congestion.

I'll bet implementation would promptly lead to better planning and a much sharper focus on the importance of developing an appropriate funding mechanism for our highway system.

September 26, 2011 8:41 AM

By Jack Kinstlinger

Chairman Emeritus, KCI Technologies,Inc.

During my 15 years as a DOT official I became convinced that the public has a difficult time relating failure to alleviate congestion or undertaking a road project with a lack of transportation funding. Rather the blame is usually directed at the agency for failing to give their project sufficient priority or a feeling that the agency is simply incapable of meaningful action. Rather than lobbying the legislature for more funding the public will lobby the agency to give more attention to their favorite project. One possible solution, at least at state and municipal level is to identify the projects and timing of implementation that will be pursued following an increase in funding. This is more difficult at the federal level where decisions are not at the project level but rather at the program level.

The Maddening Wrongness of TTI's Annual Urban Mobility Rankings

by Angie Schmitt on January 21, 2011

The Texas Transportation Institute yesterday released its urban mobility report, its annual ranking of the nation's cities based on their relative highway congestion. Topping this year's list were Chicago and D.C.

Let's imagine for a second all the ways we might measure a concept as broad as urban mobility. Maybe calculate the average speed of buses. Or factor in the percentage of people who can walk to their local grocery store.

But rather than delve into the complexity of urban transport, TTI boils mobility down to a single measure: the speed of traffic on a given city's highways. Newspapers all over the country today will be carrying stories about their city's relative congestion rate and all the stories will be based on this narrow measurement.

David Alpert at Network blog Greater Greater Washington explains that even when it comes to measuring just car commuting, TTI continues to get it wrong: Is the traveling speed on highways really the best way to measure urban mobility?

Consider two hypothetical cities. In Denseopolis, people live within 2 miles of work on average, but the roads are fairly clogged and drivers can only go about 20 miles per hour. However, it only takes an average of 6 minutes to get to work, which isn't bad.

On the other hand, in Sprawlville, people live about 30 miles from work on average, but there are lots and lots of fast-moving freeways, so people can drive 60 mph. That means it takes 30 minutes to get to work.

Which city is more congested? By TTI's methods, it's Denseopolis. But it's the people of Sprawlville who spend more time commuting, and thus have less time to be with their families and for recreation.

It's disappointing to see that TTI is still relying on this outdated formula, even after last year's CEOs for Cities report drew attention its underlying weaknesses. The most regrettable thing about TTI's rankings is that they will be used to justify highway projects around the country, which will actually cause people to spend more time driving as a result of the accompanying auto-sprawl. As James Corless of Transportation for America notes, there are much more effective approaches to pursue.

Passenger-Miles Are Overrated

Posted on 2011/09/19 by Alon Levy

One of the pushbacks I got about my post on road boondoggles is that I didn't control for passenger-miles of travel, and the number for car subsidies is much lower when one divides it by the appropriate number of trillions. This is not the first time I hear people talk about passenger-miles as a measure of inherent worth, but it doesn't make it any better.

Passenger-miles don't vote. They're not a unit of deservedness of subsidy. They're one unit of transportation consumption. They're like tons of staple as a unit of food production, or calories as a unit of consumption. We don't subsidize food based on cents per calorie.

Even as a unit of consumption, there are flaws in passenger-miles as a concept, when it comes to intermodal comparisons. The reason: at equal de facto mobility, transit riders travel shorter distances than drivers. It's very obvious when comparing total passenger-miles in transit cities and car cities (see e.g. page 36 here). Transit is slower than driving on uncongested roads, but has higher capacity than any road. In addition, transit is at its best at high frequency, which requires high intensity of uses, whereas cars are the opposite. The result is that transit cities are denser than car cities – in other words, need less passenger-miles.

What passenger-miles are more useful for is measuring intercity transportation. At intercity distance, mode choice has less influence over travel distance (though, even then, HSR and driving are shorter-range than flying, and thus passenger-miles can overstate the importance of flying over ground transportation). It is also a proxy for revenue, whereas on urban transit the fare is either flat or weakly dependent on distance. As a result, intercity railroads usually cite passenger-miles or passenger-km, and urban transit operators usually cite passengers.

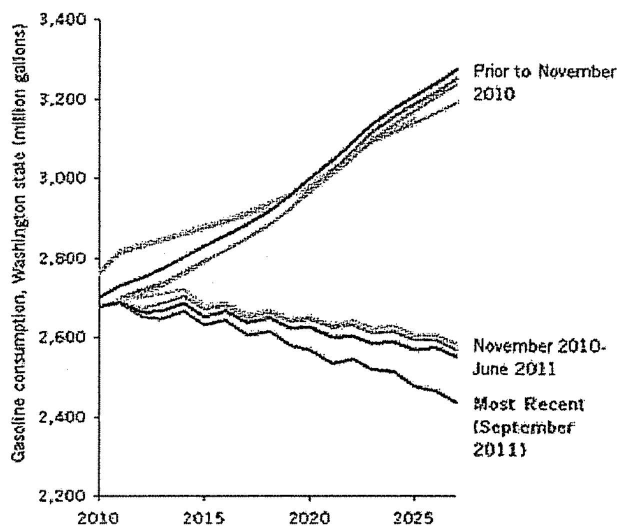
But when it comes to local transportation, it doesn't work very well. A country's mode share expressed in passenger-miles is lower than that expressed in passengers, and this is going to make transit and especially walking look much less significant than they actually are.

Hours of Delay Saved Rank	Urban Area	Savings from Public Transportation Use	
		Hours of Delay Saved (Thousands)	Congestion Cost Savings (Millions of Dollars)
1	New York-Newark, NY-NJ-CT	377,069	7,932.1
2	Chicago, IL-IN	91,109	2,030.5
3	Washington, DC-VA-MD	35,567	725.7
4	Los Angeles-Long Beach-Santa Ana, CA	33,686	708.8
5	Boston, MA-NH-RI	32,477	662.9
6	San Francisco-Oakland, CA	28,431	586.6
7	Philadelphia, PA-NJ-DE-MD	26,082	549.5
8	Seattle, WA	14,377	312.8
9	Baltimore, MD	13,924	295.8
10	Miami, FL	9,276	192.9
11	Atlanta, GA	8,589	184.4
12	Houston, TX	7,082	147.9
13	San Diego, CA	6,460	136.3
14	Denver-Aurora, CO	6,376	130.8
15	Dallas-Fort Worth-Arlington, TX	6,137	126.2
16	San Juan, PR	5,798	116.8
17	Portland, OR-WA	5,581	113.7
18	Minneapolis-St. Paul, MN	5,360	109.0
19	Pittsburgh, PA	5,038	104.7
20	Salt Lake City, UT	3,251	63.3

Gasoline Consumption Forecasts Keep Dropping

Is there a silver lining to grim gas tax forecasts?
Clark Williams-Derry on September 22, 2011 at 9:00 am

Last week, our "Peak Gas" report highlighted the fact that Washington state officials now predict a long-term decline in total gas consumption in the state. But already, the state has put out a brand new transportation revenue forecast. The big news: for at least the fifth consecutive quarter, the state's long-term gas consumption forecast has dipped.



The red line in the chart represents the most recent projection, stacked up against the previous eight forecasts. The latest numbers show a nine percent decline in annual statewide gas consumption through 2027. That's down significantly from the June projection, which was lower than the quarter before, which was lower than the quarter before that...which was *dramatically* lower than any prior projection.

The question right now in my mind is: when will the declines stop? After all, some big-name energy forecasters are predicting much steeper declines than nine percent for the US as a whole. Deutsche Bank recently said that US consumption would decline by about one-third by 2030, while the ever-optimistic Cambridge Energy Research Associates has pegged the long-term decline at "only" 20 percent over the same period.

So it's possible that, if anything, OFM is *still* being optimistic about future gas tax revenues.

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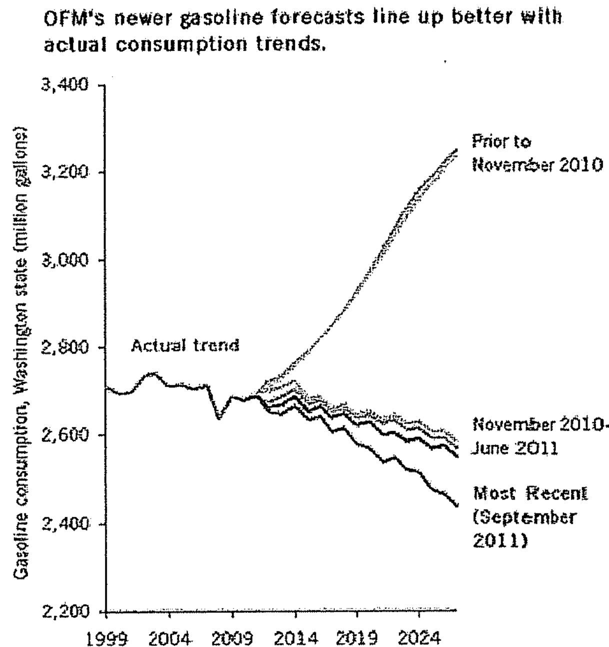
If you look past the "holy cow" message of the red line, perhaps you'll wonder what happened in November 2010 to make the forecasts change so dramatically. The answer is pretty simple: the OFM radically revamped the model they use to forecast gasoline consumption. They had to: the old one wasn't working at all.



Here's a chart that illustrates the point. It shows actual gas consumption trends in pink (I take the trendline from federal data, and adjust it a bit to match up to the state figures) against the six most recent official forecasts. It's pretty obvious that, given a decade of stagnation in gas consumption, the OFM forecasts prior to November 2010 (the ones in orange and yellow) were ridiculous (as were all of the forecasts they'd been making for years). The OFM itself admitted the error, noting that the real-world trends were more than two standard deviations below their previous predictions.

So if you look beyond the grim implications of the red line for highway finance, these two graphs demonstrate a powerful lesson: official forecasts are just guesses, and not very good ones at that.

Yet to a profound extent, our assumptions about the future of highways are shaped by the conventional wisdom about what the future will be like. And that conventional wisdom is both embodied in, and shaped by, the official projections about traffic volumes, fuel prices, economic growth, tax revenues, the policy environment, and so forth. But in the last decade or so—ever since oil prices started rising—the official projections have proven simply laughable. Nothing we thought would happen has come to pass: rather than growing inexorably, both gas consumption and VMT have flat-lined for a decade.

To me, the lesson here isn't simply that we need better forecasts. Instead, it's that if we made our transportation investments differently, *we could free ourselves from the pitfalls of forecasting altogether*. Rather than making big bets on highways that we may not need, and probably can't afford, maybe it's time to consider a different way of investing in transportation: small, flexible, can't-miss investments in refurbishing the streets, bridges, and roads we already have. Those kinds of incremental investments could make for better neighborhoods, and set ourselves up for *all kinds* of transportation futures—without forcing us to bet the farm on the riskiest sorts of megaprojects that can only work if our forecasts are perfect.