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The Myth of Gridlock

A recent report puts Milwaukee's alleged traffic problem in perspective. **by TOM BAMBERGER**

You'd think Milwaukee was a traffic hell. "Traffic congestion ... cost \$307 million in 2007," a recent *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* headline blared. "We are talking about millions of hours wasted stuck in traffic," says Bruce Speight, an advocate with the Wisconsin Public Interest Research Group. "Congestion is one of the reasons we should build more public transportation," says Patrick Curley, chief of staff for Mayor Tom Barrett.

Slow down, folks. A 2009 report by the Texas Transportation Institute, the same study that provoked our daily paper's alarmist headline, actually had nothing but good news for Milwaukee drivers. Of America's 48 largest cities, only Kansas City, Cleveland, Buffalo and Pittsburgh have less congestion than Milwaukee, and

even then by a very slight margin. According to *Forbes*, our 20-minute average commute is the third-shortest of the nation's 75 largest metro areas (not to mention our metro area placed second on *Forbes*' 2009 list of America's Safest Cities, largely due to our low number of traffic deaths).

Better yet, both congestion and commute times are trending downward in Milwaukee. According to the TTI report, we spend about 18 hours a year delayed in traffic, an hour less than a decade before. That comes down to less than two minutes of delay per trip to work.

Speight doesn't dispute the stats, but says: "It doesn't change the larger dynamic. We're still experiencing significant traffic delays, congestion, a lot of wasted time and lost productivity."

But congestion is really just an ugly word for going less than 60 mph on freeways and 35 on city streets. The ideal speed is actually less than the legal limit. Average freeway speed in Milwaukee is about 50 mph. Going slower is safer. When the Netherlands lowered highway speeds by 30 percent, deaths fell by 90 percent, reports the European Transport Safety Council.

The TTI's study, says Rob Henken, president of the Public Policy Forum, shows why light rail hasn't taken hold here. "It raises questions about the cost-benefit justification of any major transportation enhancement, including road enhancements."

Communal forms of transportation are still a last resort. Nationally, only 1.7 percent of commuters take public transportation to work, and half as many as that walk to work. The average time spent commuting on public transportation is about twice as long as driving, according to the Transportation Research Board. During the last decade, public transportation miles in Milwaukee declined 25 percent, according to the Wisconsin Department of Transportation.

"In Milwaukee, you can get almost anywhere by automobile," says Peter Beitzel, vice president of the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce. "So many people don't use public transit, they don't see the issue."

But Speight insists that will change. "When gas prices go up, more people use transit," he says. "But it has to be convenient, which is why we should be increasing service, reducing fares and prioritizing a truly multi-modal transit system. We are just building bigger highways and it hasn't solved the problem."

But is there a problem? According to the John McLean book *Two-Lane Highway Traffic Operations: Theory and Practice*, the capacity of a lane of traffic on a freeway increases 50 percent at 55 mph and doubles at 50 mph. Without some "congestion," we underutilize a valuable resource.

After all, you can drive 60 mph in Wichita, Kan., or Brownsville, Texas, but where would you go? ■

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