



# INNOVATION BRIEFS

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## **Congestion Is Here To Stay...You Might As Well Learn to Enjoy It**

### **Commentary**

***“The most important thing to understand about traffic congestion is that it is a problem that cannot be solved. There is no remedy for traffic congestion.” So says Anthony Downs, Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution distinguished scholar and author, and an acute observer of the urban scene. Mr. Downs’s commentary has been adapted from an address he delivered at a recent GAO-sponsored Conference, “Moving Into the Future: Surface Transportation in the 21st Century.”***

### **Population Will Continue to Grow**

**A crucial consideration for the future of ground transportation is the expected growth of the United States population over the next 20 years. From 1995 until 2020, the Census Bureau estimates that the population of the United States will go up by 60 million people— about 12 million every five years. So somewhere between 60 and 77 million more automotive vehicles will be added to our roads by 2020. That is a rise of 30 to 38 percent over the number that was here in 1995.**

**Thus, the sentiments of many existing residents who want to limit future growth in order to reduce congestion are total delusions. There is no way to limit growth at the regional level because no region can stop immigration from somewhere else. True, growth at the local community level can be**

**limited by simply pushing it into other places—peripheral sprawl and in-city overcrowded slums for low-income households, as in much of southern California.**

### **Automobiles Will Remain Dominant**

**My second point is that privately owned automotive vehicles will remain the dominant form of ground transportation for the foreseeable future in the United States. Attempts to cope with rising traffic congestion by shifting more people to public transit are not going to work. The automobile is, and will remain, a better form of movement for most people in spite of congestion. It is faster, safer, more comfortable, more flexible in timing and in linking scattered origins and destinations, and often cheaper, especially if you get free parking. It will not be possible to lure any significant portion of auto-driving persons into using public transit by improving the quality, quantity, or service frequency of public transit. One reason is that such a low percentage of all trips is now taken by public transit only 3.5 percent of work trips in 1995 compared with 90.7 percent for private vehicles. Therefore, even if we could triple the percentage of total commuters using public transit which is extremely unlikely — that would reduce the percentage of commuting by automotive vehicles by only 11.6 percent. That reduction would be offset by the increase in population, which is going to be much larger than 11.6 percent.**

**The only way to substantially increase the percentage of trips made on public transit would be to make the use of automotive vehicles far less convenient or far more costly—such as by quadrupling the cost of gasoline or placing heavy taxes on automobiles, as in such countries as Denmark and Singapore. But these steps will be so strongly opposed by a majority of Americans that there is absolutely zero chance that they will happen. Apologists for public transit say transit is necessary to cope with all this, and we need more subsidies for transit, because the automobile is so heavily subsidized. They should look at one number that I think is very impressive. Transit now gets 25 percent of the public spending on transportation in the United States, but accounts for less than 2 percent of all the trips. That is an impressive subsidy itself.**

### **Forms of Ground Transportation Will Not Change**

**Nor will changing the land-use patterns embodied in future metropolitan growth and development substantially alter the basic forms of ground transportation now in use. After all, 85 percent of the developed portions of the country that will exist in 2020 already exist now. Even if radical changes in the form of the to-be-added 15 percent could be achieved, which I don't think is the case. that would not substantially change the patterns already in place today. They will necessarily dominate the overall picture of transportation in 2020.**

### **Congestion Cannot Be Eliminated**

**The most important thing to understand about traffic congestion is that it is a problem that cannot be solved. There is no remedy for traffic congestion because traffic congestion is essentially a balancing mechanism that enables people to pursue six objectives other than minimizing their commuting time. Two of these objectives are held by employers and the other four by households.**

**The first objective that employers seek is having most firms use similar work periods during the day. Then, when you call up somebody at another firm, that other person is at work. Therefore, almost everybody has to go to work and come home from work at about the same time. There are some staggered working hours, but they don't really have much effect because they aren't staggered all that much. Second, the owners of businesses want to operate mainly in low-density work places, which means they are widely scattered across each metropolitan area. Those are the key objectives that employers want.**

**The first objective that households want is to have a wide range of choices of where to work and**

**where to live in different types of communities, especially if they have more than one earner in the household. Second, they want to be able to combine several different purposes on each individual trip to be efficient. Third, they want to live in a relatively low-density community. And fourth, most households want to separate their own family dwellings spatially – and particularly regarding public schools, from other families with much lower incomes and social status and often from people who are in different racial groups.**

**It is not possible to pursue all these objectives effectively without generating a lot of traffic congestion. In reality, traffic congestion is the balancing force in rationing road space that emerges from pursuit of those objectives. Yet most Americans do not want to give up any of these objectives enough to change their behavior. They would rather endure a certain amount of traffic congestion than change these objectives. It's true that the more traffic congestion they encounter, the unhappier they are. So, the amount of traffic congestion they are encountering is bad enough to make them complain, but not bad enough to make them change their behavior. If congestion becomes unacceptable, they can move closer to where they work or work closer to where they live, which many of them in fact do. But this means there is no such thing as a *solution* to the traffic congestion problem. Traffic congestion is not a disease that can be cured. It is an inherent connection in the quality of life that embodies those objectives that I described.**

**Increasing Densities Will Not Reduce Traffic Congestion**

**Raising average densities in new growth areas and emphasizing infill development to a maximum degree might somewhat reduce the cost of accommodating future population growth with adequate infrastructures. New growth suburban densities might have to rise from about 2,500 persons per square mile, which is the density of the city of Phoenix, to about 7,500 persons per square mile, which is the density of the city of Los Angeles, to make any difference. But this will not reduce traffic congestion much, because higher densities generate more local congestion, since almost as many vehicles are concentrated in a smaller space.**

### **Congestion Is Here To Stay**

**Traffic congestion is not going to decline in the future. In fact, it will probably increase as the total population rises and real incomes rise enough to enable more people to afford private vehicles. This is not a problem confined to the United States. In fact, traffic congestion is much worse in many parts of the world. It is a worldwide phenomenon of rising real income and the desire to use private transportation. There is no such thing as a solution to the traffic congestion problem because it's not really a problem. It is the result of our pursuit of other objectives, which we do not want to give up. True, some improvements can be made, but they will only be marginal. They will likely be swamped by rising metropolitan populations and the use of multiple vehicles by more households.**

**As I said, congestion is here to stay. So you'd better learn to like it. Get yourself an air-conditioned car with a stereo radio, a tape deck, a portable computer, a television set, a microwave, and commute with somebody you're really attracted to.**

**Regard commuting as part of your leisure time. You might as well learn to enjoy it.**

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C. Kenneth Orski, **Editor** korski@erols.com

1634 I Street, NW • Suite 500 • Washington DC 20006-4003

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