

THE DOOR TO DOOR MANIFESTO: *How to Fix Traffic. Now.*

EDWARD HUMES



Traffic. If you're a commuter, it's your daily torture. If you run a business, it represents hair-pulling risk and cost.

The U.S. economy suffers a \$160 billion annual hit in lost productivity from traffic jams, while drivers in some major cities spend up to two workweeks stuck bumper to bumper. Long and congested commutes even correlate with higher rates of divorce, stress, obesity and chronic pain. But all of this pales in comparison to the one, big, dirty secret of traffic: *We know how to fix it.*

In fact, we've known for years how to make rush hour jams disappear. And the fixes look nothing like the hugely expensive public works projects we've been throwing at traffic for decades without curing congestion. The approaches that will actually do the job are neither technically difficult nor financially burdensome. Some would cost nothing at all, requiring not a single bulldozer's caress.

And yet we continue to suffer bad traffic, the solutions blocked not by practicality or need, but by myth and habit that mire our door to door economy. Before we look at why this is so and what really fixing traffic could look like, it's worth considering how we got here.

The stage was set when the bones of our modern transportation system were designed for a 1950s-1960s reality in which the vast majority of households had one commuter and one (or no) car. Sure, planners designed for growth, but no one anticipated the demographic tsunami of women entering the workforce en masse. The transportation system has struggled ever since to carry an America in which the norm for each household is multiple cars with both parents driving off to work each day.

On the heels of that massive influx of traffic came another congestion generator: the age of off-shoring and outsourcing now dominating the U.S. consumer economy. Out of our ardent love of cheap shoes, socks, furniture, and pretty much everything else in your home and closet, we blithely embed ever-more fantastic amounts of transportation in everything we buy, sell, build, wear, eat, drink, and do. Unprecedented numbers of goods pour in though the nation's deep water ports and stream back and forth across the country in endless lines of trucks. Yes, trains carry a big load, too, but nearly every product bought and sold in America rides inside a truck somewhere along the line, and usually at multiple points within the inscrutably complex door to door economy. Global trade, for all its other virtues and poisons, is a mighty transportation multiplier.

Finally, there's the newest force adding trips and miles to our households and daily lives: the age of e-commerce. How convenient and wonderful this buy it now, next-day (or same-day!) delivery world appears to be for consumers. Yet how terribly inefficient it is for the transportation system that must bear it all. In America BAC (Before Amazon.com), a truckload of goods typically would be delivered to a single retail location. Now in America PAC (Post-Amazon.com), that same truckload must be delivered one piece at a time to hundreds of separate home addresses, creating several orders of magnitude more trips to deliver the same number of goods. No wonder leaders at such companies as United Parcel Service are tearing their hair out over traffic.

"I'm in the business of minutes," says Noel Massie, president of UPS's busiest region, the Southern half of California (the nation's sea, land, and air freight capital). "If the plane leaves at seven, you either get there or somebody doesn't get what they need in time. Brain scans for someone's surgery. Tissue samples for the lab. You can't mess that up. Minutes matter in this business."

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The problem is, traffic jams are stealing more and more of those precious minutes from the goods-movement industry, Massie says, threatening the wheeled circulatory system that nourishes the entire economy. He points to lack of national investment in effective transportation fixes as the culprit. “We are already far past crisis,” he worries. “And demand for goods delivery is going to double in the next 20 years.”

The transportation investments we’ve been making to ease congestion have been dominated by big, flashy projects with great ribbon-cutting moments but rationales drawn from traffic myth. Light rail projects, for all their social, tourism, and environmental good, have barely dented rush hour traffic. Trying to accelerate the flow of cars on busy city streets sounds good but just ends up killing people. And the granddaddy of all traffic myths—the enduring belief that adding lanes will end gridlock—has failed time and again. Case in point: the \$1.3 billion lane expansion of a ten-mile stretch of Interstate 405 in Los Angeles (nicknamed “Carmageddon”) did not ease rush hour traffic. Cars and trucks now take longer to drive those ten miles during rush hour than before the project, because adding lanes only attracts more cars. The same is true of the \$2.8 billion Katy Freeway project in Houston, which added a whopping sixteen lanes to Interstate 10—only to turn a 47-minute commute into a 70-minute crawl. If you build it, the cars will come—it’s called the rule of induced demand, which explains why adding lanes is like trying to solve over-eating by loosening your belt.

As demand on the transportation system mounts, as we embed ever more miles in our lives and work with every trip we take and every click we make, short and long term fixes for transportation are essential. In the long-term, if driverless technology for people and goods fulfills its early promise and becomes ubiquitous, the age of robot drivers will not only end congestion, but will likely spell the death of parking, turn car crashes into a rarity, herald the dominance of the emissions-free electric car, and end car ownership as we know it, as well. But that's decades in the future, if it happens at all, and good fixes for how and what we drive today are desperately needed *today*.

The good news: because goods movement and people movement share the same space, solving traffic for one also helps the other. So here are five ways to fix traffic in the short-term that can really do the job:

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Pay your own way. It's time to end the gasoline tax, which hasn't been raised at the federal level since 1993 and now only covers half of transportation spending. And while everyone is cheering the good news, we need to replace that moribund gas tax with the magic of congestion pricing.

Congestion pricing is, in essence, a user fee for major highways that goes up at peak times and drops after rush hour, just as electricity is priced in many parts of the country to avoid overload. Half the trips drivers take during rush hour are not work related, and so could be made at other times. Congestion pricing provides the incentive for drivers to make that shift. Presto: rush hour is smooth sailing. Just don't call it what it is: a toll.

This switch in transportation revenue sources would require very little infrastructure investment—just electronic toll scanners and monthly billing systems. The benefits would go to both individual drivers and goods movement—but only if they're willing to trade the gas tax for a toll... and for roads that finally work. Which begs the question: Do we know congestion pricing works?

The U.S. has only dabbled in a few little pilot studies, but robust congestion pricing has been put in place in such locations as Milan, Singapore, Stockholm, and London. London's results are typical: 30% reduction in congestion; 14% reduction in trip times; 9% drop in transportation-

related carbon emissions. So yes, it works. We're paying road taxes anyway, so we might as well pay them in a form that all gets us door to door faster and easier.

Time shift. This is a no brainer, and doesn't have the public toxicity of the word "toll." Either through voluntary programs or tax incentives, we need to persuade businesses and public agencies in major employment centers to stagger work start and finish times during the week. Letting employees work at home one day or even a half day out of the week, even just ten percent of total commuters, also would have a dramatic effect on congestion. The two together would deliver a knock-out punch to rush-hour traffic jams, assuming major employers would cooperate with local government and one another to set this up in an organized and mutually beneficial way.

Time shifting is an essentially cost-free, productivity-enhancing tactic that could be undertaken at the local level and would be far more effective at reducing rush hour jams than adding lanes. And unlike congestion pricing, which would be deployed on freeways and expressways, time-shifting would ease traffic jams on surface streets, too.

Convert car pool lanes to goods movement or transit only lanes.

Car pool lanes are a failure. Fewer than 9 percent of commuters car pool, less than half the number 35 years ago. Converting some of the nation's 3,000 miles of car pool lanes to dedicated big-rig lanes in major goods-movement corridors would provide a much bigger bang for the buck, particularly in the chronically congested highways connected to the nation's major ports, rail hubs and distribution centers. Separating freight from passengers would enhance safety and traffic flow, and allow trucks to "platoon"—which is a method of driving in lines very close to one another at high speed to cut air resistance and save fuel.

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As for mass transit, it's only attractive to car owners when it gets them there faster and cheaper than driving—and without inconvenience. In major traffic nightmare areas such as New York, Los Angeles, Houston, D.C., the Bay Area—you get the idea—turning select HOV lanes into bus-only high-speed lanes would be an almost ridiculously cheap alternative to building new rail transit systems. How many times would a driver stuck in rush hour have to see a busload of commuters whizz by at 75 miles an hour before she or he decides to give it a try?

Such systems would be even more alluring if they partnered with ride-share companies to solve the first-mile-last-mile problem that limits transit ridership (such deals already are in the works in a number of cities). In the future, automation will allow buses to operate like virtually linked train cars at very high speeds on such protected lanes, delivering the features of a train for the cost of a bus. This would be particularly attractive for creating express suburban conduits to major airports, sports venues and other high-volume destinations where driving can be a nerve-racking race against the clock. You just call your Lyft or Uber ride, it takes you a few miles to the nearest high-speed bus line, and you're delivered to JFK or LAX for a single, reasonable fare.

Sign me up!

Recognize some traffic congestion is good. Traffic jams on major highways/arterials are bad. But slow traffic in major business zones—downtowns, Main Streets, entertainment districts—is good. It’s evidence of economic activity, commerce, shopping, and recreation—it signals that people want to be there. Major cities and small towns should calm traffic on selected streets in such areas, adding pedestrian and bike protections and lower speed limits to further stimulate economic activity and traffic safety.

What’s needed is a clear distinction between “streets” and “roads.” Streets are primarily public spaces and engines for creating wealth. Think of the way a prosperous classic Main Street works and you get the picture. Roads, however, are supposed to be conduits to get people and goods from point A to point B as quickly as possible. A proper road should minimize reasons to stop and maximize traveling speeds.

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Unfortunately, traffic planners' strategy for decades has blurred this distinction, creating what Charles Marohn of the nonprofit Strong Towns calls "stroads." Stroads are 40-plus-mile-per-hour multi-lane avenues and boulevards that try to be both conduits and centers of commerce. They are a terrible hybrid that serves both purposes poorly, and a major contributor to pedestrian fatalities as well.

Keeping streets and roads distinct while discouraging stroad hybrids would shift congestion to areas where it's actually desirable, while keeping other thoroughfares speedy and safe. This is a new way of zoning, planning and development and it's a long-term play. Right now, America is the land of the stroad, and that can't change overnight. But some cities are adopting the new approach, sometimes called "Great Streets" or "Complete Streets," demonstrating that this transformation can happen one street, corridor, or neighborhood at a time.

Go old school on the way to school. The city of Los Angeles recently figured out that half of all trips in the metropolitan area are under three miles—easy walking or biking distance. Yet 84 percent of those short trips are made in cars. The numbers are similar in other cities, and this plethora of short trips represents a huge traffic jam reduction opportunity. Persuading drivers to abandon at least some of those short trips to the ATM or the post office

or the market, and turn them into a brisk walk or bike jaunt, could have a dramatic impact on traffic (not to mention national obesity rates). The problem is, 21st century Americans hate walking. We literally walk less than almost every other nationality on earth (yes, this has actually been measured). And many who might be inclined to bike are discouraged because they feel unsafe sharing space with cars. So convincing people to rethink those short car trips and to walk or bike instead goes against a half century of culture and habit, as well as cityscapes designed more for cars than people.

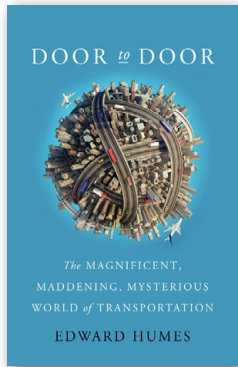
But there's one type of short trip that, if targeted, might be more amenable to change, and have a huge impact on traffic: the morning trip to school. In 1969 just under half of American schoolchildren walked or biked to school. By 2009, the walkers and bikers had dropped to 13 percent, though the average distance to school hasn't changed in many neighborhoods, towns and cities. Because it coincides with rush hour, this generational shift away from walking and biking to school has created many more car trips at the worst possible time of day, impeding both people and goods movement. By creating safe, protected bike and walking paths to neighborhood schools, suburban and urban communities alike can reduce traffic at peak hours, provide meaningful physical activity for a generation that needs it, improve traffic safety, and save on fuel and emissions. Logistically, it's not a very tough thing to pull off.

Parents could take turns leading groups of kids in bike and walking pools (a little synergy with employee time shifting initiatives could help working moms and dads find the time for this). Physical education credit could be offered as an incentive. Schools can compete with one another to see which campus can drive to school least (similar incentives have worked well with recycling and food waste campaigns).

These are local needs and projects to be sure, but they are the kinds of transportation projects and ribbon cuttings we should be financing at the national level as high priorities.

In the end, they not only make traffic better. They also make *us* better. 🇺🇸

Info



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