



Drivers can expect more gridlock, report says

Emily Bazar, USA TODAY
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Drivers in small urban communities will experience the worst increase in traffic congestion from now to 2030, and some will see rush-hour delays more than double, according to a study out Thursday.

The report by the libertarian Reason Foundation shows that commuters in big urban centers still will face the longest commutes in the nation. However, smaller communities such as Boise, and Albany, N.Y., are expected to narrow the gap.

"Moving to small-town America is not going to solve your problem," says David Hartgen, lead author of the study, who is a professor of transportation at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. "The growth in congestion is going to be worse there."

The study, using 2003 data from state and federal officials, predicts:

- In the next quarter-century, gridlock will increase by 51% from 39,500 lane miles to 59,700. A lane mile is a measure of pavement: A two-lane stretch of road a mile long is 2 lane miles.
- Commuters in metropolitan areas with at least 3 million residents will spend 65% more time in gridlock than they do now.
- Steeper increases are in store for communities with 500,000 or fewer residents. Drivers will spend up to 150% more time in bumper-to-bumper traffic.
- By 2030, many midsize metropolitan areas will experience congestion worse than present-day Chicago. Among them: Sacramento, Charlotte, Tucson and Orlando.

Population growth and commuters' preference for driving are key factors, the study says.

The solution? Hartgen and the other authors argue for building or widening roads and increasing traffic-management techniques such as signal timing and toll roads.

To relieve congestion and save 7.7 billion driving hours a year by 2030, they say, 104,000 new lane miles will be needed at a cost of about \$21 billion a year.

The authors say that is a fraction of what communities plan to spend on transportation, including roads, pedestrian-friendly improvements and mass transit.

"We don't think we need more money," Hartgen says. "We think you can spend it more wisely."

Virginia Miller, a spokeswoman for the American Public Transportation Association, calls it "short-sighted" to ignore public transportation such as buses and subway systems. She cited a 2005 report by the Texas Transportation Institute at Texas A&M University that said public transportation saved 1.1 billion hours of travel time in 85 urban areas in 2003.

"Public transportation has a proven record of helping reduce congestion that should not be ignored," Miller says.

Ronald Kirby, director of transportation planning for the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments, says remedies vary.

Washington will rely on highway construction, expanded bus service and higher toll road fees during more congested periods. "They're all part of the picture," he says.