

The day of reckoning, and gridlock, is nigh

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WASHINGTON – One of these days, a major American metropolitan city will come to a screeching halt during rush hour. There will simply be too many cars, trying to get too many places, all at once, and too little pavement to accommodate all this automotive ambition. Such is the logical conclusion of all the trends.

Recently, the Texas Transportation Institute (TTI) released its annual Urban Mobility Report. The short of it is this: Congestion just keeps getting worse. More people are spending more time in traffic than ever before, across more cities.

In the 437 U.S. urban areas, the average individual traveler loses 38 hours a year to congestion, and 26 gallons of gasoline. Nationwide, that is 4.2 billion hours, and 2.9 billion gallons of fuel, and \$78 billion. Which is about three times worse than it was in 1982, when the TTI first started putting out these reports.

But those are just the hard numbers.

How do you measure the emotional strain of sitting there, helplessly pounding the steering wheel, watching your life waste away in a bizarre pile of steel and exhaust, with nothing even worth listening to on the radio? Then add in the time lost to recovering from the excruciating commute, all the hostility that now needs to be defused (or taken out on somebody), and, of course, the heart attacks. According to the New England Journal of Medicine, being stuck in a traffic jam more than doubles the risk of a heart attack in the ensuing hour.

You begin to wonder: Is this what all our prosperity has brought us, then? More three-car pile-ups? Are we choking on our own affluence?

In many ways, our modern traffic dilemma is a perfect triumph of individual rationality over collective rationality. Sure, many of us in urban areas could take public transportation to work, but the bus doesn't come that often, and it takes longer, and worse, you are then stuck sitting with the great unwashed masses. To relinquish the car is to relinquish control, freedom and all those other cherished values that made this country great. Of course, if everybody took the bus, the buses would run more often, and be nicer, and get there faster (because there would be less car traffic), But who goes first?

What of the other solutions? Carpooling? Four out of five commuters now go it alone, up from three out of four just a few years ago. Who can spare the time it takes to pick up an extra person? And besides, who wants to give up that valuable alone time? Telecommuting? Never became acceptable. Living closer to work? Great if you can afford to live somewhere nice downtown, but what about the schools, and the peace and quiet? What if your spouse works somewhere else? Shopping locally? But can you really get everything you've come to expect, and all the best deals?

So it goes. We know what we should be doing, but pity the local politician who tells people how to live their lives, and fines them if they don't comply. After all, what could be worse than sitting in traffic?" Why,

having the mayor tell you that if you want to drive into the city by yourself during peak traffic time, well, that will be \$100, please.

And yet, how else will this traffic problem solve itself without some courage on behalf of our public leaders? The incentives are all misaligned. Even if the traffic is bad, the other options are still worse for most people. So slap on some congestion pricing, as Michael Bloomberg is proposing to do in New York City. Use that money to improve public transportation and to subsidize urban redevelopment so more people can afford to live closer to work. But pity the politician.

Change isn't easy, and it doesn't happen overnight, either.

And one more thing: What comes of global competitiveness, when we can't even get to work without getting an ulcer?

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