

Coping with car congestion

Ah, the joy of the automobile! Driving with the windows closed to eliminate outside noise and to get the full effect of the four-speaker stereo while listening to Sibelius, Brooks or Franklin, depending on one's taste; sitting in seats more comfortable than those in the living room at home; and taking in the colorful foliage along this country road in the rural-western part of the state where we are the only car on the road—how could life be any better?

The automobile gives us that sense of independence to go where we want, when we want, in luxurious surroundings and at a nominal cost, especially considering the price of gasoline. This is why more and more of us are using this marvelous invention that some claim was started just 100 years ago when the Duryea brothers completed the first recorded run by a gasoline-powered vehicle on a public road.

It didn't take long for the idea and the vehicle to take hold. Seven years later in 1900 there were 8,000 registered vehicles in the country. By 1909 in his first full year of production, Henry Ford, that master of mass production, was turning out more than twice that number of Model T's alone. In the 1920s registrations nearly tripled from 8 million to over 23 million. In 1923 alone, more than 1.8 million Model T's were manufactured.

The Depression and World War II slowed this activity down, but auto production boomed after the war, and by the early 1950s registrations were double that of the 1920s. The year 1950 marked the high point of American dominance when we produced 81 percent of the world's cars.

Auto production in the country reached a peak of 9.7 million in 1973, the year of the oil crisis, and has never again come close to that figure. In fact, by 1980 Japan became the leading producer of cars, a lead that this country held since 1904. In 1991, this country produced only 16 percent of the world's cars.

But this is not to say that we don't have the cars on the road. In fact, more than one-third of the world's 450 million cars are in this country, and we have less than 5 percent of the world's population. At the national level this translates into 1.8 cars per household, and Rhode Island almost matches that at 1.7 cars for each of the 378,000 households in the state, according to the 1990 census.

We may be below the national average in cars per household category, but most would agree that the 550,687 passenger cars and 151,399 trucks on the 5,846 miles of public roads of this state in 1992 can lead to problems.

Traffic congestion is becoming an issue because of increasing numbers of autos on the road, yet recent findings suggest that some driving conditions are actually better today than just a few years ago.

Still, the problem of traffic congestion is with us because the number of vehicles is increasing faster than our ability to control them. In Rhode Island, for example, while the population grew by only 54,000, or 6 percent, from 1970 to 1990, the number of cars increased by 226,000, an increase of 56 percent.

Further, Rhode Islanders drive to work as single occupants to a greater degree than the average in the country. While 73 percent of Americans drive to work alone, according to the 1990 census, in Rhode Island the figure is 78 percent. And while this represented an increase of 9 percent over 1980 for the nation, in Rhode Island the increase was 13 percent.

This increased single-occupancy means of getting to work reflects improved economic conditions so that commuters were able to buy cars. In the late 1980s, for example, 20 percent of the retail dollar spent in the state went to new car dealerships—today that figure is 12 percent. This improvement came at the expense of car-pooling, public transportation and other means of commuting, all of which declined from the previous period, both at the national and state levels.

Rhode Island College well illustrates the problem of congestion that results from too many individual drivers. Of the nearly 10,000 students enrolled, approximately 90 percent commute, almost all by car. More than 80 percent of these cars arrive on campus with just the driver. This pattern contributes to a parking problem which is readily apparent on campus.

At the national level studies have docu-

mented the increased congestion common throughout the country. One of these studies identified 10 of the worst congested areas in which congestion had increased by 26 percent over the past eight years.

Surprisingly also, of all the 1.4 trillion miles traveled in 1990, according to the survey, the principal purpose of travel was family and personal business, representing 33 percent of all travel, as compared with 32 percent of travel for commuting to work. Social and recreational travel was the other major component of travel, at 27 percent.

Similar to car numbers increasing at a faster rate than the population is the greater increase in the miles traveled. The 1.4 trillion miles of 1990 represents a 55 percent increase over that of 1977 while the country's population grew by only 12 percent during the same time period.

Ah yes, that wonderful automobile, Enjoy it while you can, because even though the interior comforts and gadgetry get better, the outside conditions of congestion will undoubtedly get worse. The numbers are working against us.

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