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Road Warriors

Tie-ups. Backups. Gridlock. The American commute has never been so painful. Is there any solution?

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For Kathy Kniss, staying calm while getting to and from work is about sticking to her rules. The 29-year-old publicist must be out the door of her Long Beach, Calif., home by 7:45 a.m. at the latest. Some car-choked neighborhoods are just off limits. When leaving her office in Culver City, she must shut down her computer by 5:54 p.m., so she can be in her car by 6:00 to avoid the traffic buildup on side streets and make it to La Cienega Boulevard before 6:15.

SIGH. Over 3 million people drive 90 minutes or more to work. Photography by David Butow-Redux for *USN&WR*

Five years ago, Kniss says, commuting caused so much stress that she had panic attacks on the road and had to see a hypnotherapist. But moving closer to her office is out of the question. "I live on the beach, and I pay the same amount for a two-bedroom that I would be paying in the middle of Los Angeles for a complete dump," she says.

It's only about 25 miles from Kniss's office to her home, but driving to her little bit of heaven in the evenings is a grueling 75 minutes, meaning that, on average, her speedometer is hovering just above zero. That's on a good day, when weather, accidents, or bad luck don't interfere. "It's Murphy's Law," Kniss laments about her drive. "If something can go wrong, it will."

The status of the City of Angels as a commuting hell is nothing new. But by 2030, according to some estimates, driving in Atlanta, Minneapolis, and nine other urban areas will be worse than present-day Los Angeles. Nationwide, more and more people will see their roads clogged for longer periods of time. With Mayor Michael Bloomberg's rollout last week of a plan to charge hefty tolls for driving in most of Manhattan, New York became the most recent city to try to fight back. Others are investing in mass transit or high-tech traffic management. Across the country, new technology, new thinking, and cold cash are being leveraged in aggressive efforts to combat congestion.

But serious doubts linger about whether any of these plans will amount to more than a finger in the dike.

People have been complaining about congestion since the time of Julius Caesar, who banned some traffic from downtown Rome. But in America, the 50-year-old Interstate Highway System is showing its age, more people are on the roads, and traffic has grown dramatically worse. Americans spent 3.7 billion hours in traffic in 2003, the last year for which such figures are available-more than a fivefold increase from just 21 years earlier. The amount of free-flowing travel is less than half what it was in the '80s, and the average commuter now loses 47 hours to congested traffic every year.

Disconnect. The issue mainly boils down to population growth outpacing road building. America has about 70 million more people than it did a quarter century ago, but highway miles have increased by a little more than 5 percent in that time. The Department of Transportation estimates that the demand for ground transportation-either by road or rail-will be 2½ times as great by 2050, while highway capacity is projected to increase by only 10 percent during that time.

Changes in consumer behavior also aggravate traffic congestion. A strong economy has driven car ownership to new heights; the average household now has slightly more cars, 1.9, than drivers, 1.8.High property values and restrictive zoning in many areas have made finding quality housing near one's workplace virtually impossible for many, and the quest for affordable housing has

sent people to ever more-distant locales. Commuters to New York City increasingly call the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania, two hours away, home, while workers in Washington have streamed into Gettysburg, Pa., a full 85 miles away.

Folks in places like these are considered "extreme commuters," those traveling 90 minutes or more to work every day. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, more than 3 million people-about 2.8 percent of workers-now have such commutes, a 95 percent increase from 1990.

Dave Givens, 47, hits the road at 4:30 a.m. each day for a three-hour drive from his home in Mariposa, Calif., on the edge of Yosemite National Park, to his job at Cisco Systems in San Jose, Calif. It's an hour before he even stops for his first coffee and picks up his carpool partner. He adds 372 miles to the odometer daily. "It's kind of a daily mind game of what's on the radio traffic reports," says Givens, who won first place in an "America's Longest Commute" contest run by Midas Inc. Givens says the drive is a small price to pay to live in the town his family has inhabited since the Gold Rush. And he says he enjoys the rural lifestyle.

But all that driving takes a toll on a commuter's time, money, and peace of mind. David Lewis, a British scientist who studies the brain's response to stress, found that the tension commuters experience when stuck in traffic is comparable to that felt by first-time parachutists. Part-time New York cabdriver Sol Soloncha knows that all too well. "I'm a Buddhist," he says. "I do yoga, I practice meditation, and weekday traffic gets so bad that even I can't keep my composure during it."

Traffic can be more than an annoyance. Medical symptoms ranging from sleep deprivation to digestive problems are linked to long commutes, and a 2004 article in the *New England Journal of Medicine* found that being stuck in a traffic jam more than doubles one's chance of experiencing a heart attack in the subsequent hour.

Consequences. Traffic inflicts social costs as well. Harvard public policy Prof. Robert Putnam found that community involvement falls 10 percent for every 10 minutes spent driving to work. And leisure pursuits are casualties, too. "It sort of turns me off to have to go far to see any sort of entertainment or any arts, or even to go to the beach," says Donald Pierce of Granada Hills, Calif. "Any good day at the beach, there's going to be a lot of traffic."

Major improvement in traffic congestion not only requires massive government intervention but also involves getting all political forces on the same page. And that can be an insurmountable hurdle. In Virginia, years of fierce legislative battling over who should foot the bill for traffic relief in heavily congested Northern Virginia finally resulted in a compromise between Gov. Tim Kaine and antitax Republican legislators in April. The bill authorizes $3 billion in borrowing for statewide improvements, such as widening highways and improving rail service, and lets car-choked regions raise taxes and fees for local projects. But even backers urged Virginians not to set their hopes too high, with a Republican state Senate leader calling the bill "one of the ugliest bastard stepchildren" to pass the Senate.

Some cities, including Houston, have embarked on aggressive programs of road building, trying to stay ahead of their swelling populations. But significantly increasing capacity is just not feasible for metropolitan areas with high population densities. Building more roads in places like Chicago or Philadelphia would involve either leveling buildings or tunneling-an option that is now virtually unthinkable after Boston's troubled, and fabulously expensive, Big Dig project. Even when new roads are built, they are often quickly filled to the point of congestion by drivers who previously traveled at other times, took other roads, or used public transportation, says Brookings Institution traffic expert Anthony Downs.

With that in mind, more cities are looking to enhance public transportation options. In January, Denver opened new lines that more than doubled the miles covered by its light rail system, to 33. By 2017, the city hopes to have laid down 119 miles of track and 18 miles of bus rapid transit, at a cost of $4.7 billion. Charlotte, N.C., will unveil the first of what is expected to be a five-line rail system in November, joining cities like Salt Lake City and Dallas, whose low population densities don't make them obvious candidates for rail.

Perhaps most surprisingly, Los Angeles, where driving is almost a religion, is undergoing a veritable transit boom, furiously digging new subway tunnels and expanding a rapid bus system that will let buses zoom down their own designated lanes. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa is pushing hard for his dream of a "subway to the sea," a Metro line running under the notoriously jammed Wilshire Boulevard. "This city will one day have a world-class transportation system, period," he proclaims.

There is cause for optimism. Less than 18 months after the October 2005 opening of the city's Orange Line-a high-speed bus line using an old railroad right of way to avoid traffic-ridership had reached the city's 2020 projections. And unlike nearly every other city, Los Angeles drivers spend less time in traffic now than they did a decade ago, thanks to both mass transit and aggressive traffic management.

But experts are skeptical that public transportation offers a real solution to congestion problems. In the 2000 census, just 4.7 percent of people said they used public transit to get to work, and transit represents only 2 percent of daily trips in Southern California. In most cities, even if the percentage of trips using transit tripled, which is not likely, the resulting drop in congestion would be overwhelmed by the projected growth in population. And it would no doubt be extraordinarily expensive. Villaraigosa estimates that a public transit system that would seriously reduce congestion, rather than just slowing its growth, would require funding "that has heretofore been unprecedented. I'm talking about ... tens of billions of dollars and beyond." That's in Los Angeles alone.

The prohibitive cost of alleviating gridlock is one factor behind the Department of Transportation's new congestion initiative, announced last year. The department hopes to partner with cities to show the usefulness of charging tolls based on the level of congestion, raising the price during rush hour to deter some commuters from traveling during peak times. DOT believes this would keep highways near capacity without descending into gridlock, and increase the number of cars able to travel on a road daily by 40 percent. "What we are trying to do is push states to be as aggressive as they can be," says Transportation Secretary Mary Peters.

Cordons. That includes encouraging the implementation of "cordon tolls," which would charge drivers for entering crowded urban areas. Such systems are already in place in London (box, below) and Singapore, but Bloomberg's proposed $8 charge for daytime driving in Manhattan, assessed using E-ZPass technology and cameras, would be a first for America. In announcing his push for tolling, Bloomberg conceded that he had once been a skeptic himself but said he had come to see it as necessary.

The proposal faces an uphill battle in the state Legislature. Trucking unions are already griping because trucks would be charged a whopping $21 for entering Manhattan, and politicians in the city's outer boroughs are unmoved by the mayor's pledge to increase public transit to compensate for the charge.

DOT Secretary Peters concedes that cordon tolling is not politically palatable in most cities and that perhaps the most realistic option is so-called HOT lanes, converted carpool lanes where drivers willing to pay a variable fee can ride with carpools and buses. Though often derided as "Lexus lanes" for the wealthy, they have proved effective in several states as a means of letting those willing to pay avoid gridlock. In Minnesota, which opened its first HOT lanes in 2005, drivers in the lanes travel at an average speed of 50 miles per hour 95 percent of the time. But HOT lanes lack the major benefit of other tolling options for reducing congestion; since people can still use the untolled lanes free, the lanes don't discourage drivers from hitting the road during peak hours, limiting congestion relief. And even congressional Republicans who preach limited government are skeptical that market forces are enough to bust the nation's bottlenecks.

The DOT's plan also encourages states to follow a growing trend of seeking private financing for building or managing roads. An Australian-Spanish consortium paid $1.8 billion for a 99-year lease of the Chicago Skyway in 2004, and a number of states have inked long-term leases of toll roads or are considering it. Both the New Jersey and Pennsylvania turnpikes could go on the auction block soon.

However, both the American Automobile Association and the American Trucking Associations are wary of leasing highways, and previous leases have sometimes borne out their concerns. The deals often forbid government to build roads that would compete with the private toll road. After selling a private company the right to operate HOT lanes on the Riverside Freeway for $120 million in the late '80s, officials in Orange County, Calif., had to buy them in 2003 for more than $200 million to make improvements on the road's untolled lanes. In Indiana, the Republican loss of its House majority in November was blamed in part on Gov. Mitch Daniels's unpopular 75-year lease of the Indiana Toll Road, which led to a toll hike.

"There is certainly a strongly held belief in this country that roads are for the public benefit ... and that they are free," says Bill Graves, the president of the ATA and former governor of Kansas.

With few appealing options, many traffic experts suggest that the growth of congestion is inevitable. That might not be the end of the world, says traffic expert Downs. To remain efficient and prosperous, people largely have to be traveling to the same places at the same times of day. Traffic is simply the equivalent of waiting in line. Downs contends that only a serious economic downturn-such as the one that sent congestion plummeting in Silicon Valley after the tech bubble burst-can reverse the cycle of rising congestion.

That doesn't mean government is helpless. Many cities are looking to Los Angeles for lessons in how to slow traffic's growth. To avoid blockages, the city has stopped road construction during rush hour, stiffened penalties for parking illegally, and deploys a roaming fleet of tow trucks to quickly clear stalled or damaged cars off the freeways.

Tech fix. New technology also gives the city an edge. Its Automated Traffic Surveillance and Control system uses sensors buried in the road to measure traffic flow and can automatically adjust 3,400 of the city's 4,400 traffic lights to ease congestion. The system can, for example, extend a green light for a bus that is behind schedule or an emergency vehicle rushing to an accident. At its high-tech command center, buried four stories under City Hall East in downtown Los Angeles, ATSAC operators can view bottlenecks from hundreds of cameras throughout the city and make their own adjustments.

The system has given Los Angeles unprecedented power to respond to unusual traffic patterns, from the Academy Awards to the 1994 earthquake that collapsed key sections of the city's freeway system. And the city is hoping to use some of its share of California's recently approved $19.9 billion transportation bond-the largest bond in state history-to link the remaining lights to ATSAC.

The city has most likely shaved minutes off its frustrated citizens' commutes, but such measures can go only so far. Each morning and evening, despite all their efforts, ATSAC operators still watch freeways clog and Wilshire Boulevard turn as suffocating as the La Brea Tar Pits it runs beside. "We're maxing out what our roads are able to do," says John Fisher, assistant general manager of the Los Angeles Department of Transportation.

How bad can traffic in American cities get? Los Angeles's long-range transportation plan is a grim look at the future. By 2025, Los Angeles County is projected to have 3 million more people, which could prompt a 30 percent increase in car trips. At that rate, the report suggests, "congestion will last nearly all day long." None of the city's innovative solutions-from new subway lines to traffic management systems-are likely to change that. And at the rate traffic in other cities is snarling, they won't be far behind.

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