Congestion Fact Sheet

Road congestion in the Twin Cities is bad, and getting worse. Here are some basic facts, from Randal O’Toole’s report titled Twin Cities Road Congestion: It’s No Accident

* The number of hours the average Twin Cities driver wastes sitting in traffic quadrupled between 1982 and 2014.

* In 1982, the Twin Cities were rated the 35th most congested metropolitan area in the U.S. By 2016, the Twin Cities were the 21st most congested urban area.

* By O’Toole’s estimate, congestion costs the Twin Cities metro area nearly $4 billion a year in wasted time and increased business costs.

* Residents of urban areas comparable to the Twin Cities enjoy much greater mobility. Kansas City, for example, has 1,320 lane miles of freeway per million residents. The Twin Cities have only 670 freeway lane miles per million people, a figure that has shrunk since 1982. As a result, average driving speed in the Kansas City metro area is 40.1 miles per hour, compared with 29.4 mph in the Twin Cities.

* Indianapolis is another example of an urban area comparable to the Twin Cities that has done a far better job of managing traffic. In 1982, Indianapolis was more congested than the Twin Cities. Since then, the Indianapolis area has grown twice as fast as the Twin Cities, but its congestion is nevertheless far lower today than in Minneapolis/St. Paul.

* The American Transportation Research Institute recently identified the 100 worst bottlenecks in the U.S. The Twin Cities had four, more than Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, or any other urban area except Atlanta and Houston.

Why have the Twin Cities done such a poor job of managing traffic? The answer is political and ideological: the responsible state agencies are not trying to reduce congestion, and have prioritized trains and bicycle paths over roads and highways.

* MnDOT’s policy shifted away from reducing congestion soon after Gov. Mark Dayton won election in 2010. The agency’s most recent Annual Minnesota Transportation Performance Report explains, “MnDOT expects congestion to remain the same or increase as the region continues to grow. Since 2010, MnDOT’s strategy has shifted from reducing congestion toward providing alternatives to congested travel.”

* MNDot has also said that “we can’t build our way out of congestion,” a claim that is implausible on its face. If building more lanes is useless, then why aren’t all of our highways two-lane? Obviously four-lane highways carry more traffic than two-lane highways, and six-lane highways carry more than four-lane.

* The Metropolitan Council is responsible for planning transportation in the Twin Cities metro area. In its 2030 transportation plan, it said, “The Council recognizes that congestion will not be eliminated or significantly reduced in the Metropolitan Area.” Instead of reducing congestion on the roads, the Met Council wants to take advantage of horrific commute times to force Twin Cities residents onto trains, buses and bicycles.
The Met Council’s 2040 plan calls for spending $6.3 billion on “transitways,” principally light rail lines, and only $700 million on increasing road capacities. Incredibly, the Council proposes that an equal amount—$700 million—be spent on bike and pedestrian paths and safety enhancements.

Trains and bicycles will never make a major contribution toward meeting the Twin Cities’ transportation needs.

No matter how much money we spend on trains—an obsolete, 19th-century technology—they will never make more than a minor contribution toward the area’s transportation needs. Currently transit (i.e., trains and buses) accounts for only 1.4% of passenger miles, and virtually no freight miles, in the Twin Cities. Bicycles account for even fewer miles. How do Twin Cities residents get where they need to go? More than 95% of the time, they drive.

Before long, driverless automobiles are predicted to add dramatically to the carrying capacity of our roads and highways. It would be foolish to invest billions in unneeded, 19th-century fixed rail technology when we are about to experience a transportation revolution.

The Met Council’s and MNDot’s obsession with trains and bicycle paths is making Twin Cities traffic congestion worse.

A 2015 study by the University of Minnesota found that opening the Green Line between Minneapolis and St. Paul displaced traffic from University Avenue, so that “speeds have dropped greatly” on I-94. Similarly, the Hiawatha light rail line added 20 minutes or more to travel times between Minneapolis and Bloomington on Highway 55.

Currently, Washington Avenue is under construction in downtown Minneapolis. The purpose is not to increase traffic capacity, as you might assume, but rather to reduce it. The current six-lane Washington Avenue will be downsized to four lanes, with two elevated lanes reserved for bicycles.

Conclusion

Twin Cities traffic congestion is no accident. There is no reason why the Twin Cities metro area, with a rather modest population and located on a prairie where there are no significant obstacles to building adequate highways, should be one of the most congested urban areas in America. The problem isn’t topography, or inadequate funding, or fate. The problem is that the responsible government agencies are not trying to reduce road congestion. Indeed, it often appears that they welcome congestion, because impossible driving conditions will force Twin Cities residents out of their cars onto trains, buses and bicycles, where MNDot and the Met Council want them.

Public pressure on our legislature, our governor and the responsible state agencies is needed to produce a transportation policy that meets the needs of the people of Minnesota.