

# The Public Purpose

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## The Reauthorization Roadblock

It is pretty clear to anyone who travels to work on the nation's highways. Traffic congestion is getting worse and worse. Local opinion polls routinely place traffic congestion right up there with concern about taxation as concerns in among the public.

The nation's drivers don't watch transportation politics very closely, but if they should overhear some of the current Washington debate, they might be tempted to believe that help is on the way. It isn't.

Congress is working on reauthorization of the highway-transit bill, which uses the federal gasoline collected from motorists and truckers for transportation purposes. Originally, the tax was established to build the national interstate highway system. But in the intervening decades, it has become a Christmas tree about ready to fall from the weight of ornaments that are too heavy. Usually, reauthorization is for six years. A review of the last six years of spending gives a preview of what can be expected.

From 1995 to 2001, more than \$180 billion (all figures in 2000\$) in federal gasoline taxes have been collected for transportation purposes. Not even 20 percent of that amount was used to provide the additional capacity that is required to keep traffic moving in urban areas. Over that time, urban freeway capacity was expanded approximately four percent. This would have been sufficient if traffic demand had grown by four percent. But, it grew three times that fast (Figure).

Of course, without sufficient additional capacity, it was inevitable that traffic congestion would get worse. Over the past six years, data from the Texas Transportation Institute (TTI) indicates that total hours of peak period delay in the largest urban areas increased nearly 50 percent --- four times the growth in traffic demand. Urban freeways now generally operate at above design capacity during peak hours, which means that they cannot accommodate free-flow speeds, with the inevitable result that traffic delay increases much more rapidly than traffic.

And it will get much worse. If the new highway-transit bill is like the old (and there is no reason to believe it will be any better), the gap will continue to widen between new capacity and new traffic. Over the past six years, TTI data suggests that average work trip travel time has increased 2.3 minutes. Census data indicates that during the 1990s, average work trip travel time increased at four times the rate of the 1980s. At the rate of the last six years one-way travel times to work could rise another seven minutes by 2020 --- 50 hours per year per commuter.

For more than 20 years, part of the gas tax revenue has gone to transit, in the hope that attracting drivers from cars would reduce traffic congestion. That has, to put it mildly, simply not worked. The 2000 Census indicated that fewer people use transit to get to work than in 1980. Over the same period, 35 million more people have started driving to work --- more than work in the entire nation of France. Transit's share of travel will soon drop below one percent, probably for the first time since before horse drawn omnibuses began service in the early 1800s. Yet, over the past six years, transit has received nearly 20 percent of the gas tax funding.

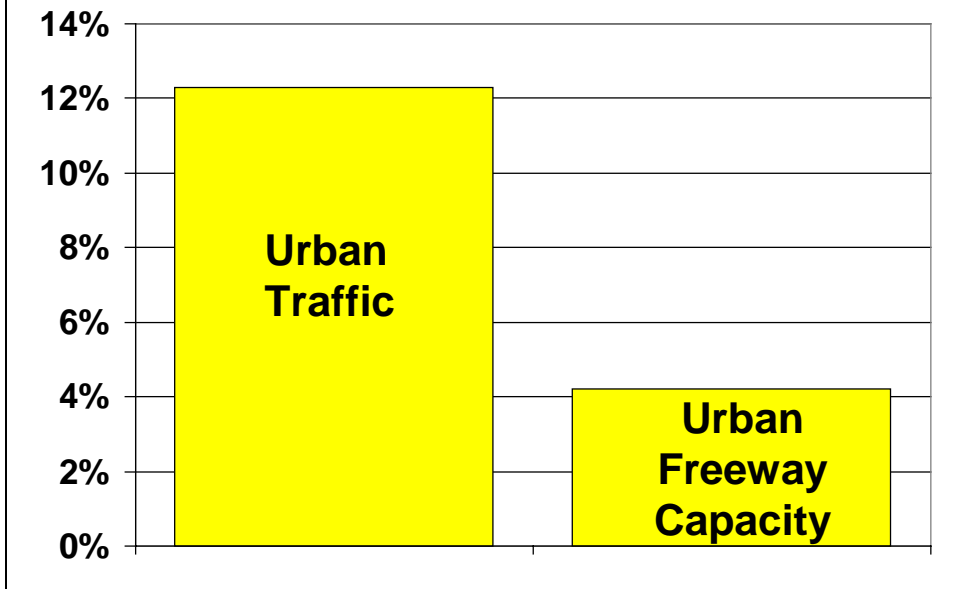
Rather than reducing traffic congestion, spending gasoline tax money on transit has increased traffic congestion. If the subsidies to transit (which are in addition to other massive subsidies from federal, state and local governments) had been spent instead to provide additional urban freeway capacity, much of the capacity gap would simply not have developed, and commuters would be spending less time stuck in traffic.

Urban traffic congestion is emerging as the most important transportation problem in the nation. As travel times continue to slow, product prices will increase from higher trucking costs. People will have less leisure time, while business productivity could suffer as traffic conditions make the morning commute less and less reliable.

In the face of these difficulties, the highway and transit bill is simply not up to the challenge. Its principal purpose seems to be to spend money (and support jobs). Worse, an anti-automobile, anti-mobility lobby has successfully steered the program in such a way to spend as little as possible on new capacity. They use as justification an "induced traffic" theory to the effect that additional roadway capacity creates additional traffic. The same logic would attribute variations in the birth rate to maternity ward capacity. In fact, only one US urban area has built a substantial amount of new freeway capacity in the last 20 years --- Phoenix. And there, roadway travel per capita has declined. So, in the federal bill, there's plenty of money for soundwalls, transit, reconstruction or anything that doesn't add an inch of capacity to the roadway system.

Vision, at least with respect to the highway and transit bill, is as hard to find in Washington as a member of Congress seeking electoral defeat. From the nation's metropolitan planning organizations to Washington, everyone knows that traffic is going to get a lot worse. Yet the present proposals contain nothing in the way of plans or objectives for making things better --- only for spending money. We'll do that under any circumstances. But in the process, why shouldn't the nation's drivers and truckers, who provide the money, not also receive the benefit of the additional capacity so necessary to the continued economic viability of our urban areas?

## Urban Traffic & Capacity:1995-2001



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