

More and wider roads cause more congestion, not less, report says

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 Conventional wisdom holds that if you build a road, or widen one, traffic will improve.

But what if that's wrong? A new report by an advocacy group for biking, walking and transit says that adding new roads and highway lanes encourages more people to drive instead of taking the train or other means of getting around, thus creating more congestion.

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The study issued Monday by the Active Transportation Alliance finds that roadway expansion has spurred an explosion in driving since 1980, worsening area traffic and leading to more crashes and pollution.

"We have to rethink this decadeslong strategy of relying on cars to take us everywhere on wider and wider roads to bigger and bigger parking lots," said Ron Burke, executive director of the alliance. "We don't think it's an effective strategy to address congestion. We also don't think it's the future in urban areas."

Burke said that widening roads and making driving easier and faster leads some people to take more car trips than they otherwise would, and to live farther from work and other destinations, while some companies will choose to locate farther afield and away from transit.

Instead of more and wider roads, the region should instead invest in transit and making it easier to bike and walk, the alliance said. The report comes just before the Tuesday close of the public comment period for "On to 2050," the new draft plan by the [Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning](#), or CMAP, which sets the agenda for transportation funding for the region and determines which projects are eligible for federal funding.

CMAP has designated some major highway expansions — including the widening of Interstates 294 and 290, and portions of Interstates 55 and 80 — as "regionally significant" and deserving of money. CMAP also favors transit projects like extending the [CTA's Red Line](#) south to 130th Street.

The Active Transportation Alliance wants highway expansions off CMAP's list and a moratorium on highway expansion in the Chicago area.

"We don't think they're a good investment," said Burke. He noted that the estimated price tag of planned expansions of I-294, I-290 and I-55 is \$7.4 billion, while just \$12 million was spent on Chicago's 100 miles of new bike ways from 2011 to 2015.

In a written response, CMAP defended its support for planned highway rebuilding and expansion.

"The plan's goal is a region with a well-balanced, multimodal transportation network," CMAP Executive Director Joseph Szabo wrote in an email. "Given the region's limited resources, the plan takes a 'fix-it first' approach while advancing ambitious strategies for increasing transit ridership and walkable communities."

The Illinois Department of Transportation also is reviewing the report, and responded in a statement that the department "takes into consideration all modes of travel when planning projects, in urban areas, in particular."

Michael Sturino, president and CEO of the Illinois Road and Transportation Builders Association, scoffed at the Active Transportation Alliance's report, saying it ignores the reality that people enjoy the freedom automobiles give them. He also said the alliance is unrealistic, thinking it can convert a sprawling area where most people need cars to get around into something more like Europe.

"They don't like the internal combustion engine. They don't like cars," said Sturino of the alliance. He said that people will drive anyway, and when highways are too crowded, drivers simply go on local streets, moving congestion there.

The alliance report uses numbers from the U.S. Census Bureau and its American Community Survey, along with data from CMAP, IDOT and Texas A&M University's Urban Mobility Report.

The study found that between 1980 and 2016, the percentage of people walking, biking and taking public transit to work fell from 24 percent to 17.1 percent. During the same period, the number of miles vehicles traveled grew in the region by almost 69.2 percent, while the population grew at the much lower rate of 18 percent.

The alliance report said that though 1,000 miles of new expressways and arterial lane-miles have been added in the region between 1996 and 2015, congestion keeps getting worse. In 2014, Chicagoans spent 61 hours stuck in traffic, compared to 31 hours in 1982.

Meanwhile, the number of bus and train commuters in the suburbs fell from 9.3 percent to 6.1 percent and in the city from 32.4 percent to 28.2 percent between 1980 and 2016, the study said.

Despite Chicago's high number of transit options, including the "L" and Metra systems, walking, biking and transit use in Chicago is lower than in other big cities, according to the study. Just over a third of Chicago commuters, or 36.5 percent, get to work by walking, biking and transit, compared to 67.7 percent in New York City and 54.3 percent in Washington, D.C., the report found. In traffic-choked Los Angeles, the percentage is 13.7 percent.

The study also noted that Chicago's share of bike commuters increased from just 0.18 percent to 1.7 percent in the last four decades, despite the city's population loss.

Among those favoring new thinking about road construction is Hawthorn Woods Mayor Joseph Mancino, who opposes the long-discussed proposal to extend Illinois Route 53. Supporters of the project believe it will relieve congestion in Lake County, where the population is growing, but opponents fear it will increase traffic and hurt the environment. The extension is not part of CMAP's priority list for new projects.

"New roads are not always the answer," Mancino said. He said less expensive traffic fixes like creating a railroad grade crossing and improving existing roads would be a better way of alleviating congestion in Lake County, saving billions of dollars and preserving natural areas.

Some proposed highway projects include a transit piece. The plans for expansion of I-55 and I-290, for example, would add "managed" lanes, open both to Pace buses and cars willing to pay a toll.

The Illinois Tollway created a “flex lane” for Pace buses and emergency responders when it expanded the Jane Addams Tollway. Planners working on a redesign of North Lake Shore Drive are also considering a managed bus and tolled lane — either by adding a lane in each direction or replacing a current lane of traffic.

The Active Transportation Alliance and the Metropolitan Planning Council, a policy research group, both support converting an existing lane of Lake Shore Drive traffic into a bus lane, instead of adding a new lane. But Sturino said this would just cause more problems.

“If you take a car lane away, where will those cars go?” said Sturino. “They’re going to surge into all the surrounding neighborhoods.”

Transportation song quiz

Last week’s song was about a transportation infrastructure project, in which a man races a machine. Man wins, but at a cost. The song is “John Henry,” performed by various artists, from Harry Belafonte to your third-grade music teacher. David Perry of the Beverly neighborhood was the winner.

This week’s transportation song references multiple ways of getting around, including a bike, a car, a train, a wing and a prayer. But the destination does not matter. What’s the song, and who sang it? Email me the answer. The first one to get it right gets a Tribune pen, and glory. I’ll announce the answer on Twitter by noon.

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