



July 7, 2009

## Congestion rife on Louisville highways

Louisville among worst U.S. cities its size with 38 hours lost yearly

*By Marcus Green*  
*magreen@courier-journal.com*

Louisville isn't likely to brag about this Top 5 ranking:

The city is among the most congested of its size, despite a slowdown in the number of rush-hour commuters blamed on higher gas prices and a faltering economy, a new report finds.

Only one other metro area with 500,000 to 1 million residents — Tucson, Ariz. — had longer delays than the 13-county Louisville and Southern Indiana area, where the typical driver wastes 38 hours a year in slow-moving or halted rush-hour traffic.

And only Nashville logged more total travel delays than Louisville. It took drivers here 19 million hours longer than necessary to complete trips because of congestion.

The overall cost of the congestion: \$409 million in wasted fuel and wasted time.

The results offer a mixed picture of how Louisville copes with tie-ups on popular surface roads and interstates, said David Schrank, a transportation researcher and co-author of the study by the Texas Transportation Institute, which is affiliated with Texas A&M University.

The amount of time local drivers spent stuck in traffic stayed relatively constant from 1997 to 2007, the most recent year measured in the report. Still, that amounts to roughly a full week of work stuck behind the wheel.

"That's still not something that's acceptable to most people," Schrank said. "But the fact that it's still approximately 40 hours — it was about 40 hours five years ago, 10 years ago. ... A lot of (the) time you'd say it's a success if congestion didn't grow."

He said cities may get some relief as driving slows during the recession, but there's no indication of a decline in Louisville. The total vehicle miles travelled on roads in Kentucky's major cities — 1.4 million — was flat in April compared to the same period in 2008 and up slightly from April 2007, according to the Federal Highway Administration's most recent monthly estimates.

Ken Sheridan estimates he logs about 20,000 miles a year driving across the state, teaching safety training to E.On U.S. employees and contractors.

He spends several days a week in Louisville, where "the traffic flow seems to move, for the most part, fairly well."

In fact, Louisville's traffic is better than larger cities like Los Angeles and Chicago and even regional cities such as Indianapolis and Charlotte. It's worse, however, than places like Cincinnati, Memphis

and Raleigh, N.C.

The report's backers include road building and public transit interests, and the study authors suggest that solving the nation's congestion problem involves many approaches — building more lanes, adding new public transportation, even flexible work hours so employees can bypass morning and afternoon rush hours.

"Building more capacity, building more highways is not the solution," said Barry Barker, executive director of the Transit Authority of River City. "I think we've seen that over the last few decades: You don't build your way out of congestion."

The economy, however, has taken a toll on TARC's operations in recent years.

Facing lagging occupational-tax revenue, in June the bus agency's board approved a plan to use about \$1.8million in federal economic-stimulus funds to avoid cutting service or raising fares.

By September, Barker said, TARC plans to apply for a share of \$1.5billion in stimulus funds that could help ensure riders can catch buses every 15 minutes along Preston and Dixie highways.

The report focuses on congestion but doesn't address safety, said David Morse, president of the Coalition for the Advancement of Regional Transportation. He also favors increased public transit over road building.

Commuters riding on a bus, for example, "are going to be in a vehicle with a professional driver," Morse said. "They're much safer than if they were driving and multitasking, talking on their cell phones. They're just much safer."

Proponents of the \$4.1billion Ohio River Bridges Project, which would add two bridges across the river and untangle the Spaghetti Junction interchange east of downtown, say the report supports that new crossings are needed.

"The findings illustrate the need for the bridges project and the importance of the action of the General Assembly in passing the bridge authority legislation during the special session," said Ed Glasscock, chairman of The Bridges Coalition of business, labor and government groups.

The bill clears the way for Kentucky and Indiana to create a two-state authority to oversee financing for the project, which has been hobbled by Kentucky's inability to produce its share of funding.

The study notes that congestion returned along with the economy during regional recessions in Texas in the mid-1980s, California in the 1990s and northeastern states in the 1980s.

"The economy has sort of put the brakes temporarily on growth and congestion," Schrank said, "but history shows us there's a good chance we'll pick up where we left off."

Reporter Marcus Green can be reached at (502) 582-4675.

---