

Ad campaign blames transit for traffic congestion

John Croman

July 21, 2017

MINNEAPOLIS -- An ad campaign by a conservative think tank blames the Metropolitan Council and MnDOT for traffic congestion, accusing those agencies of shifting priorities away from roads and toward transit, bicycle and pedestrian projects.

The Center for the American Experiment's billboard on I-35W declares, "Stuck in Traffic? Blame Dayton's Met Council."

The organization's ubiquitous radio commercials feature the line, "It's by design; the Metropolitan Council has decided deliberately not to build enough highway lanes to force us on to bicycles, buses, and trains."

But the reality is that the vast majority of transportation funding comes with strings attached. The Metropolitan Council and MnDOT can't shift money from one mode of travel to another on a whim.

"Roughly 97 percent of traffic funding is dedicated to the mode it's assigned to by law," Nick Thompson, the Met Council's transportation director, told KARE.

For instance, the sales tax money collected in the metro area for transit can't be used for other types of projects. Likewise, federal matching grant money for rail projects can't be diverted to building more highway lanes.

"It's usually directed toward highway funding by state or federal, or toward transit funding. So it's not flexible in that sense it can move back and forth between the two."

Thompson spent many years as a traffic operations engineer at MnDOT, so he's well versed in highway planning as well as the interplay between modes. He said simply add more lanes to freeways doesn't guarantee that motorists won't find themselves in jams.

"The misconception that is out there is that lanes are not being added. There are multiple projects under construction that people are sitting in today that are adding lanes to our interstate network," Thompson remarked.

He pointed to the added lanes on I-35W, the Crosstown Highway, I-494, I-694, Highway 61 and others as sections of those highways were redesigned and realigned.

He noted the new Wakota Bridge in South St. Paul now carries 10 lanes across the Mississippi River, in contrast to the old four-lane bridge it replaced. But that stretch of I-494 still becomes congested.

"There's a pent-up demand, so when you build more lanes, you carry more traffic, but it does not solve congestion," Thompson remarked.

Yingling Fan, a transportation engineer and regional planning expert at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs, said there's also a pent-up demand for more transit, and it would be a mistake to turn away from it now.

"The reason we're seeing more congestion right now is because we don't have a very good high capacity transit system, so people have to rely upon roads."

Adding driving lanes isn't the cure-all because cars, especially with single occupants, simply don't carry as many people as buses using those same lanes, or trains headed in the same direction.

"A freeway lane can accommodate 1,600 vehicles per hour, on average about 2,000 passengers per hour," Fan said, "With bus rapid transit you increase that to 4,000 passengers an hour, or double that. With light rail you raise the capacity to 40,000 people per hour."

Much of Fan's interdisciplinary research has centered on the interplay between transportation, land use, public health, and social equity. While suburban sprawl was fed by the desire to get away from urban centers, many suburbanites still work in the cities and are looking for ways to avoid driving and parking.

"People already voted with their feet as well as their money. If you see how many construction cranes are in central areas of our region it's clear this region wants strong cities."

Fan also noted that younger people are looking to live in cities, or along transit lines because they're not enamored with the idea of driving. That's also creating pressure to build a more robust transit system.

O'Toole Report

The Center for the American Experiment is based on a 28-page report written by Randal O'Toole of the conservative leaning Cato Institute.

O'Toole notes the Twin Cities Metro area has gone from the 35th most congested metro area in 1982 to the 21st most congested in 2010. And a 2015 urban mobility study by the Texas Transportation Institute from 2014 ranked the area the 17th most congested.

Thompson, the veteran traffic engineer, said it shouldn't be surprising that congestion levels are rising in the Twin Cities due to rising populations, an expanding economy and a persistent gap in overall transportation funding.

"We have congestion, we're a growing region, we're prosperous. But we also have a fairly stable level of congestion in our region."

The same Texas Transportation Institute study found that since 2002 the number of commuters in the Twin Cities has climbed from 1 million to 1.4 million. And while congestion rose it was contained by key investments made in both highways and transit, according Thompson.

O'Toole faults MnDOT and the Met Council for planning for more investments in transit when most commuters still drive cars, and aren't likely to switch to buses, trains or biking.

Thompson said MnDOT's focus has been on maintaining and preserving the highway infrastructure that exists, and to make safety improvements along the way, rather than expanding the freeway system. Transit, on the other hand, is still catching up with population trends.

"There's new infrastructure being built for transit, while the highway system is fairly complete, and we're just doing expansions in spots. So we're at a place with transit where with highways 20 to 30 years ago."

He said the emphasis at MnDOT has been to give commuters more choices, because their needs change over time. But he rejected the notion that transit is being built at the expense of traditional highways.

Professor Fan also took issue with the O'Toole report, which was not peer reviewed.

"You want to have transportation system that can get people from point A to point B in a much higher capacity, and the freeways are not the answer," Fan explained.

One of O'Toole's suggestions is to add more traffic capacity is elevated highways, a double decker highway if you will. Thompson said such a system can work in limited, special situations, but not for long stretches of roadway.

"We're talking about a system of very long bridges. It would be tremendously expensive to build, let alone all the special interchanges it would take to get from one level to another, which could cause all kinds of disruptions to surrounding areas."

The Metropolitan Council has been a frequent target of criticism by Republicans, who have accused the agency's board -- all appointees of Democratic Governor Mark Dayton -- of concentrating resources on the Twin Cities core at the expense of suburban and exurban areas.

GOP state lawmakers have moved to redesign the Met Council Board, to dilute the Dayton's influence.