

And what's your tallest traffic tale?

By Sharon Dargay
staff writer

The 1978 VW Rabbit rattled violently, sputtering its final gasp and succumbing to a steaming radiator arrest in stop-and-go traffic on John R and Farmington in Detroit.

Neighboring motorists cursed the stalled junk of steel for blocking their path.

Police officers tried to intimidate the car back to life.

Swarms of pedestrians zig-zagged their way through the mass of stopped autos.

The newspaper reporter in the dead Rabbit was frazzled but managed a smile.

She knew she would get more mileage out of the experience than the car.

She knew that tales of the road are like driver's licenses — every motorist has one.

And she knew that when her story was exhausted, new material was waiting just around the corner.

IT HAPPENED ON MIDDLEBELT
Wendy Reiss, freelance actress, slid behind the wheel of her Buick Skyhawk and headed home to Maple and Middlebelt after a day on the job in Westland.

It had rained hard that day. So hard that in parts of Farmington and West Bloomfield, motorists who later talked about smooth sailing on the roadways meant they had traded their V-8 engines for outboard motors.

"Total gridlock" greeted Reiss at the 12 Mile-Middlebelt intersection, sending her on a two-hour search for an unobstructed three-mile route home.

"Every time I'd go up a road, traffic was stopped. I'd have to re-route. I was literally in a maze. I thought I was outsmarting everyone. I thought I knew every nook and cranny," she recalled.

"I got so frazzled. I was low on gas and had no money. I was trying to get to the NBD on Middlebelt. It was like living in New York. No one would let me in."

"I went way out of my way, down Farmington Road, past Drake to Haggerty and then back up to 15 (Maple)," she said.

Reiss learned from her experience. She carries some cash with her at all times. But, she admits, "I don't know if anyone can ever be prepared for something like that."

THE GOOD 'OL DAYS
Traffic jams were born before the first automobile rolled off the assembly line.

"Most of the city planners looked to the automobile as a means of getting rid of congestion. You had people, horses, horses pulling wagons, street railways and automobiles. But the great expectations turned sour," said Jim Wren, manager of the patent department for the Motor Vehicle Manufacturers Association of the United States, in Detroit.

"They created confusion. They were noisy, dirty and they smelled. People put them on blocks in the winter. They didn't drive in the spring because the roads were so bad."

Those who managed to zip around the tie-ups risked collision with speed traps, created when police stretched ropes across the road.

"There were several patents at that time for scissor mounted on cars," Wren muses.

Better roads and the disappearance of the horse-drawn vehicle didn't alleviate congestion, because auto traffic increased.

"Even Grand River was a three-lane road until the 1950s. They used the center lane for passing — both ways — which was dangerous."

"Driving today is so much easier. One (stranded) vehicle can cause lots of problems. But think about how many vehicles are on the roads. You don't expect that some breakdowns. We've come a long way."

MOMMY, WHY IS THERE GRIDLOCK?
Ask a group of kids.

"DON'T KISS WHILE YOU DRIVE, OR PUT ON MAKEUP," a group of youngsters at Neighborhood Childcare Center, Rochester, suggested in unison.

"We had two people in front of us, and every 10 seconds the girl would kiss her boyfriend," said 9-year-old Eric Reid.

Eric dreams of inventing jets that would rocket his family car over amorous slowpokes.

"We were at this light and the car in front of us was putting on nail polish," added Emily Gilroy, 9.

"She was putting on nail polish she was still there when the light turned green."

A car horn brought the mobile manicurist to life.

"I think she spilled her nail polish," Emily giggled.

Em's twin, Erin, said a shrink gun would be a long way toward reducing the number of big traffic jams and bad drivers.

"I'd tell everyone, 'Hey, get moving,' and then I'd just get a blaster to disintegrate their engines," schemed an inventive Rachel Lawton, 7.

WIT BEHIND THE WHEEL
Jerry Elliott has built a career on the road.

"I used to have a 1984 Ford Escort — the sporty L model — with 140,000 miles. I have a 15-minute routine I do in my act about it," said Elliott, a stand-up comedian and former Livonia resident.

"I was arrested in Virginia for having a radar detector in my car! They detained me for five hours and fined me \$350."

"But West Virginia's worse. I have a friend there doing five to 10 for possession of a cassette player."

Elliott mixes reality and razzing in his observational-style routines, performing in clubs from coast to coast. He lives in Columbus, Ohio, and is more likely to fly to major gigs in New York and Los Angeles, but still drives to some engagements.

He hit the road with his act 10 years ago, turning down a promotion from porter to salesman at a local car dealership.

"I'm on the road quite a bit. The worst traffic situation is in Los Angeles. If you have a one-hour drive to the show, you have to leave three hours in advance. If I were at the beach and had to be in Hollywood, it's about a half hour drive. I'd have to leave 2-3 hours ahead of time."

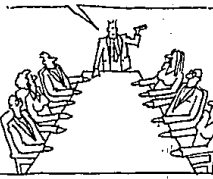
Elliott turns up the air conditioning and pops his favorite tape into the cassette player when his Chrysler Le Baron convertible is stopped in traffic.

"I like coming back to the Livonia area," he said, pointing out that traffic is worse in Oakland County than in his hometown.

"Twelve Mile and Southfield, that's a bad intersection. But not as bad as what I've seen in other parts of the country."

trapped in TRAFFIC

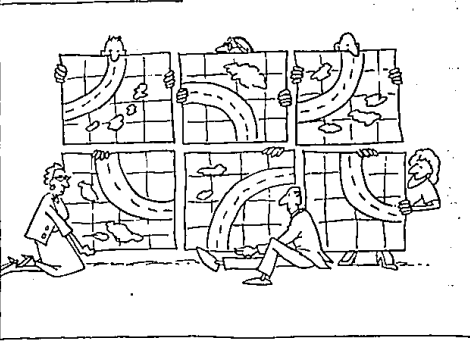
WE ALL KNOW OUR ROAD SYSTEM MUST BE UPGRADED TO HANDLE THE INCREASE OF TRAFFIC IN OUR COMMUNITIES. OBVIOUSLY NO ONE WANTS TO HAVE HEAVY TRAFFIC ROUTED THROUGH THEIR BACKYARD, BUT ...



AS REPRESENTATIVES OF YOUR VARIOUS COMMUNITIES, I AM ASKING FOR YOUR IDEAS ON WHAT ROUTE THE NEW ROADWAY SHOULD TAKE THRU EACH OF YOUR COMMUNITIES SO THAT IT MAY BEST SERVE US ALL. WE WILL REVIEW THESE IDEAS NEXT THURSDAY ...



NEXT THURSDAY...



Why no road master plan?

By Bill Kols
staff writer

The road to relief from Oakland County's bumper-to-bumper traffic is paved with problems, and the completion of Interstate 696 may actually worsen gridlock, officials say.

Traffic experts are divided on the impact of the expected opening of what many consider the "missing link" in the county's road system.

Some predict the freeway will draw traffic from other east-west roads. Others fear it will generate even more traffic by revitalizing businesses along the highway's corridor.

The Oakland County Road Commission, meanwhile, says it needs direction from leaders and residents in individual communities in its quest to decongest Oakland's roads.

"We don't have a book with a binder on it that says 'master plan,'" commission spokesman John Joy said. "What we do have is a strategic planning process. We're going to all 61 communities and finding out what they want in a road."

OAKLAND COUNTY is a city in itself — it's the new American city. People may work in places like Troy or Southfield and live in places like Rochester or Farmington Hills. They go east, west, north and south, but they don't leave Oakland County.

Road commissioners are urging individual communities to alert them to proposed development and shifts in population centers, Joy said.

Bettering relations may be the only path to progress

in a county so ensnared in traffic that the brake pedals on many vehicles are twice as worn as the accelerators, said Bruce Madsen, director of the Bloomfield Township-based Traffic Improvement Association.

"I don't see how they can do anything else," he said. "They can't stay in their ivory towers. They must get out and listen these conversations."

The TIA, which advises agencies on traffic and road safety issues, takes a similar approach by asking community and corporate leaders for ideas on topics such as carpooling and mass transit, Madsen said.

"The basic philosophy is that there's not enough money in the world to enable us to build our way out of this problem," he said. "We need to get the people together who have a stake in all this."

WHEN ROAD improvements are needed in Oakland County, safety sets priorities, Joy said. "Our concern isn't so much whether you arrive there on time as whether you get there alive," he said.

Long Lake and Big Beaver Roads in Bloomfield Hills and Troy are examples of planning tailored to the desires of the communities through which they shuttle traffic, Joy said.

"You've got one mindset that says, 'I don't want four-lane roads blowing through my community,'" he said. "Meanwhile, you have more of a metropolis that says, 'We want big boulevards.'"

The linking of Royal Oak of the eastern and western segments of Interstate 696 is expected to be finished by Oct. 31, according to the Michigan Department of

Transportation.

But traffic experts are split on just how much relief motorists can expect from the completion of the freeway — especially in northern Oakland County.

"I don't foresee it easing off any time soon," said John Sherwin, a helicopter pilot who monitors rush-hour traffic for WWJ-AM radio. "There are only a few north-south routes, and you have to take the big ones."

"THE EXPERTS say there will be a more equal distribution of traffic," said TIA's Madsen. "I don't know. It could load up I-75 and create even more havoc."

David Hay, a demographer in Oakland County's strategic planning division, predicted the opening of the interstate will ease traffic on major east-west arteries.

"But my hunch is that it won't have much of an effect at all in the Birmingham and Rochester," Hay said.

The new link may actually worsen traffic by stimulating business growth along I-696, a report published by the county's department of community and economic development suggests.

Retail sales in Southfield, Troy and Farmington Hills are expected to increase by more than 17 percent by the end of 1990, according to Donald E. Wilson, a Milford management consultant.

"On every freeway that's opened, there's been development," said Carmen Palumbo, transportation manager for the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments. "Whether that's good or bad is in the eyes of the beholder."

POW! So who killed mass transit?

By Alice Collins
staff writer

The 1974 dream plan called for a 254-mile high-tech mass transit network linking Oakland, Wayne and Macomb county commuters with their jobs throughout metropolitan Detroit by 1990.

But railroads and underground, ground-level and overhead light rail cars would whisk people from place to place, easing the traffic burden on streets, roads and expressways.

It didn't happen. During the 1980 GOP national convention in Detroit, the Budd Co. took the opportunity to promote its new state-of-the-art commuter rail car the company hoped would be bought by the Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority for its Grand Trunk commuter run. Ronald Reagan's son and daughter, joined by the media and regular customers, rode from Detroit to Pontiac, making stops in Royal Oak, Birmingham and Bloomfield Hills along the way.

The publicity stunt was good for the Reagans. But as for the Budd Co., selling railroad cars to SEMTA, it didn't happen.

JUST THREE YEARS later, faced with a \$18 million deficit, SEMTA eliminated the commuter train, ending a rail service that had been carrying passengers between Detroit and Pontiac for 50 years.

Two years ago, Amtrak, the federal railroad network, began studying a possible revival of the commuter service. It hasn't happened.

Striving for an effective bus system that would link residential neighborhoods to the employment, shopping and entertainment centers in the area continues. There's a new, strong effort being made.

But firms like light rail, subways and aerial transit have disappeared from the design boards. Missing is talk of rapid transit linking Oakland County with Detroit.

Why is mass transit so much more to most major metropolitan areas in the country, but not to Detroit?

The experts start off by citing the cost of building and operating such a system — and the lack of a commitment of local revenue to keep it going.

"It isn't financially viable, and this is true wherever it exists," said Michael Labadie, senior associate with the traffic consulting firm Barton-Aschman Associates Inc. of Southfield.

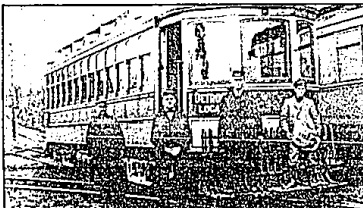
Labadie, whose firm has conducted many traffic studies in the area, questions the value of mass transit as far as its ability to reduce traffic jams. "From \$6,000 to 100,000 drivers want to be on the Telegraph corridor every day," he said. "How many of those trips are you going to be able to get on a bus? We'd need so many trolleys or buses to make a difference you wouldn't be able to do it."

THE PREFERENCE for using personal cars is so strong that Labadie believes only major "incentives or disincentives" could change minds.

"Examples of incentives might be providing a fast lane for the exclusive use of buses or cars with two or more occupants, providing a shuttle service that takes you from the transit drop-off to your office, or making the service very inexpensive."

Effective disincentives might include restricting the days of the week when a person could drive his or her own vehicle, providing no places to park or making it very expensive to do so.

"It might be they'd have to say, 'Mike, you can't drive your car on Tuesdays or Wednesdays,'" Labadie continued. He admits that it would take a great deal to convince him to give up driving his



Yes, Virginia, there once was mass transit. This interurban, pictured at a stop on what is now Woodward in Birmingham, was one of six lines radiating out from Detroit to such far-away places as Rochester, Farmington, Orchard Lake and Pontiac.

own car to work. "The money and time it costs me to drive back and forth wouldn't convince me to give it up. I just don't want to sit by some big guy with a cigar or have kids screaming in my ear."

SMART isn't yet talking about seeking local revenues. Its first goal, according to Nowak, is to gain the confidence of the public. The new buses will be smaller and clean. Subways and light rail systems between Detroit and the suburbs aren't in SMART's plans. But it's possible the commuter trains might one day be restored, he said.

Rapid transit systems in Chicago, Boston, New York and Washington D.C. are considered successful, but have not headed off massive rush-hour traffic jams.

WASHINGTON'S Metropolitan Transit Authority rail system, which links suburban Virginia and Maryland with the city, "works pretty well for me," said Eugenia Martin, a resident of suburban McLean, Va., who works in D.C. "If I couldn't ride the Metro, I'd try harder to find a job out here."

Paul Minor, a business executive who lives in Reston, Va., another Washington suburb, doesn't commute into the city. His work takes him to high-tech centers in suburban Fairfax, Arlington and Montgomery County. "The traffic problem I'm faced with is a traffic jam. The same trip can take you anywhere from 15 minutes to 1 1/2 hours. It's unpredictable."

While not all transportation experts would recommend a sleek rapid transit system between Oakland and Detroit, even if the money were available, at least two have regrets that the one they recommended in 1974 isn't in place today.

Oakland County Circuit Judge David Breck and Joseph P. Bianco both served as chairman of the SEMTA board in the 1970s, when the original plan was designed and proposed.

"WE'VE HAD SOME successes," Bianco said recently. "The Detroit People Mover is one. But I'm disappointed that for all the effort, time and money, that today we don't have a fully integrated system for southeast Michigan. I'm sorry the railroad transit out we had for 50 years is gone. I'm sorry the Woodward light rail plans went nowhere. We missed some significant opportunities over the years that we'll never be able to recapture."

Breck, a Birmingham public official when he served on the SEMTA board, said recently: "When we called that big press conference and announced we were going to build rapid transit out Woodward to Pontiac, studies showed it would have more use than any other system in the world. It's even more needed today."

"We had grand plans," added Breck. "We didn't have the mon-

...reasons given by the experts

Here are the major reasons experts familiar with the local situation give for the lack of mass transit in the metropolitan area:

- People here love their cars and are willing to spend the additional time in traffic and pay for upkeep, gasoline and parking for the convenience of driving themselves.
- Automobile manufacturers and suppliers have quietly campaigned against it here in "automobile country." Auto executives either deny or refuse to comment on the accusation. Chrysler Corp. news relations manager James Kenyon said his company has always declined to comment on such suggestions.
- Mass transit systems — bus, van and rail — are cost intensive and cannot be fully financed through fares and federal/state funding. In Oakland County there has never been a dedicated local source of revenue — a must for mass transportation.
- Unlike other metropolitan areas in the country, major work centers and residential areas in the Detroit area are spread out and continue to spread farther.
- Federal and state money used to improve transportation in southeast Michigan fell off during the recession years and was never reinstated.
- Area voters have never been given an opportunity to vote on a transportation tax.
- There has been disagreement between Oakland County and Detroit officials as to how mass transit money should be used. Oakland prefers buses and is currently concentrating on expanding its system within the county. Oakland has objected to spending great amounts of money only to serve the people along the Woodward corridor between Detroit and Pontiac, which was a key in the original plan.
- There is subtle and overt racism surrounding mass transit plans and a resulting reluctance to build more convenient transportation links between the still primarily white suburbs and the predominantly black populations of Detroit and Pontiac.