

trapped in TRAFFIC

Up side of gridlock

Fatalities, speeding accidents go down

By C. L. Rugenstein
staff writer

Believe it or not, gridlock has an upside.

Though the state's seat belt law has reduced traffic fatalities in Oakland County, congested roads may also have played some part in saving lives.

"When you have a lot of congestion, what accidents you do have tend to be property damage rather than personal injury or fatal accidents," said Robert DeCorte, director of engineering and data services for the Traffic Improvement Association of Oakland County.

After all, if you're bogged down in traffic, you're not moving very fast. And, as we've heard, speed kills.

Traffic association statistics showed a total of 48,622 traffic accidents in 1988 — a 43 percent hike over the 1980 total of 33,895.

However, traffic fatalities, drunk driving and speeding accidents were down, due in part to clogged roads.

All this as 100,000 more residents and \$324 million worth of new homes, offices and businesses were added to Oakland County since 1980.

ALTHOUGH IT would seem logical to conclude that more traffic results in more accidents, "there's no way of telling how many accidents are caused by overcrowding," said

DeCorte. "We don't know the relationship."

What he does know is that there's no immediate remedy in sight. "We in Oakland County simply don't have the money to build roads," DeCorte said. "And frankly, a lot of communities don't want bigger roads because widening the roads will draw more traffic."

"What we're working on now are some solutions available, some unique ideas," DeCorte said. "We're looking at working with commercial and major businesses to see what can be done."

The ideas they plan to promote for employees of Oakland businesses include work hours, job sharing, and four-day work weeks.

"Seven thirty a.m. is a peak travel time" for employees, DeCorte said. If businesses allowed staggered starting and quitting times for employees, it would spread the traffic over two three-hour rush periods per day, 8-9 a.m. and 5-6 p.m., he pointed out.

"Chief Dave Piche (of the Bloomfield Hills Police) attacked this problem head-on," DeCorte said. "He had a problem with people making left turns at 5 p.m. from Bloomfield Parkway onto Long Lake Road."

Piche wrote a letter to the businesses in the parkway suggesting they stagger quitting times. Did it work? Not yet, but employ-

ers apparently put the word out. Piche said he got a letter from a client of one of the businesses, signed by four other people, saying he was crazy. He also suggested employees call the Parkway via Woodward and use the turn-around to go west on Long Lake. He'll check for compliance after Oct. 30, when construction on Woodward is scheduled to end.

THE FOUR-DAY work week was a success for county road maintenance crews this summer, DeCorte said.

Crews worked four 10-hour days Monday through Thursday and took Fridays off.

"One of the definite benefits was that we didn't get in anybody's way," when people headed north for long weekends, he said.

Job sharing "tends itself well to office paper-processing types of jobs," DeCorte said. "Instead of having one person work an 8 to 5 job, one person could work 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., and the other 1 p.m. to 5 or 6 p.m."

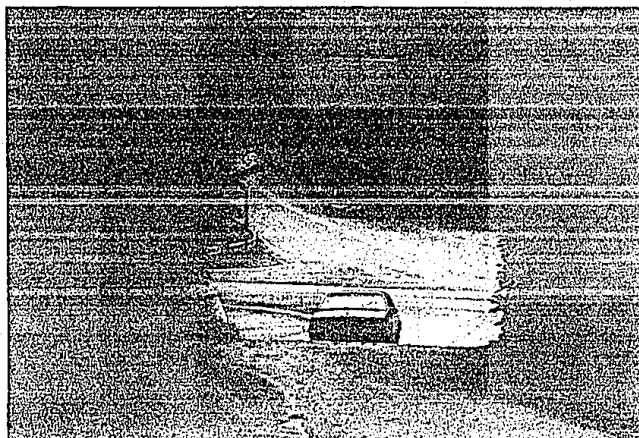
The idea would help not only traffic, but get more people into the employment arena, he said.

One more idea the county is working with is retraining of senior citizen drivers in a program called 55 Alive/Mature Driving.

"We're helping them learn to work with congestion, to do their errands at less busy times."

It will take a lot of coordination within the county and the business community to make the solutions work, DeCorte said.

"There are more solutions to the congestion problem than (levying) more taxes and building roads," he said.



DAN DEAN/staff photographer

Not every community seeks improved roads. Franklin Village residents want 14 Mile to re-

main unpaved between Franklin and Inkster roads to discourage through traffic.

Does your hometown WANT better roads?

By Brian Lysaght
staff writer

West Bloomfield and Farmington Hills officials are hoping a new and larger road will ease traffic gridlock on Haggerty Road in west Oakland County.

Tiny Franklin, meanwhile, is doing its best to cope with the cars that clog its main street each afternoon.

In Rochester Hills, homeowners rejected plans to build five-lane roads to handle increased traffic flows, choosing instead smaller roads that won't disrupt residential areas.

Several communities in the construction area of I-696 expect that the completion of the freeway will reduce traffic on local surface streets.

Everybody knows that Oakland County has grown rapidly in the last two decades and has the traffic to prove it, but local communities find different ways to deal with traffic jams and busy streets.

Some pin their hopes on newer, bigger roads, while some plan to keep their streets just the way they are, doing little to encourage motorists to pass through town.

MOST RESIDENTS have come to accept the problem.

"One thing we learned is, where do you go in Oakland County where there isn't a tie-up?" said Edmund Baron, a Rochester Hills city councilman.

Bloomfield Township Supervisor Fred Korzen, like leaders of other nearby residential communities, said much of Bloomfield Township's traffic is coming from somewhere else and going somewhere else.

"But there's nothing much we can do about that. We can't close our borders," said Korzen.

Whit Jones, president of Franklin Village, said a line of traffic often winds along Franklin Road in the center of the quiet little town. Despite the gridlock, there is no call to widen or pave roads, he said.

"We'd like to preserve Franklin as it is. It's semi-rural and has a rustic atmosphere, and I think most of the residents like it as it is," Jones said.

The village is seeking voter approval for money to hire another police officer whose primary duty would be traffic control in Franklin and neighboring Bingham Farms, Jones said.

THE STATE DEPARTMENT of Transportation is expected to announce later this year plans to expand Haggerty Road, or to build a new road west of Haggerty, between I-96 and Pontiac Trail. Haggerty is notorious for rush-hour gridlock.

West Bloomfield Township officials are supporting the new road, and so is David Call, assistant city manager in Farmington Hills.

"It's a very worthwhile project that needs to be constructed," said Call, who studied the project.

Without the expanded roadway, traffic will spill onto surrounding roads, causing more problems as drivers seek to avoid tie-ups, Call said.

The city is also working on financing the redesign and expansion of 12 Mile Road to make it a major east-west street, he said.

BUT CONCERNED CITIZENS For West Bloomfield is one group that opposes the Haggerty Road expansion. They say the new road would damage the environment, waste money and actually increase traffic problems in the area.

A new and bigger road would fill as quickly as the existing one, said

Lorna McEwen, co-president of the group.

"Basically, two-lane gridlock is better than eight-lane gridlock," said McEwen. "The Concerned Citizens group suggests adding a left-turn lane to help ease the tie-ups as well as accepting the situation."

Southfield is expecting the completion of I-696, which will link the county's east side to its west side, will reduce traffic on its east-west surface roads, said Paul Terrian, assistant director of the city's Department of Public Works.

The state has also proposed another entrance-ramp to I-696, between the existing ramps at Telegraph and Orchard Lake. That too would cut rush-hour jams in the Telegraph/12 Mile/I-696 area, he said.

Southfield's population of 80,000, swells to 125,000 during the day.

Rochester Hills' planning commission recently adopted a road master plan that a consultant drew up within the limitations of homeowners' concerns.

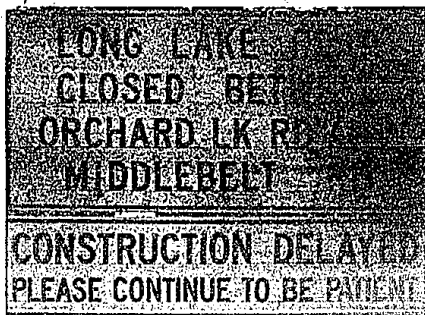
TWO YEARS ago, homeowners groups there presented 5,600 signatures on a petition demanding the city prohibit five-lane roads.

The homeowners wanted to maintain the city's residential flavor by limiting road construction, said Baron, a city councilman who helped organize the petition drive.

Instead, the city will develop some four-lane boulevards, which are safer and more compatible with residential areas, he said.

Neighboring cities like Troy and Auburn Hills, which have larger office, industrial or high-tech growth, are responsible for handling the traffic that they produced, Baron said.

"There are techniques to manage growth, and to manage growth you have to manage traffic," he said.



DAN DEAN/staff photographer

Sometimes it's one step back before taking two steps forward. Road construction causes more than its share of congestion.

The sprawl damages the environment, destroying valuable wooded areas and wetlands, and isn't fiscally sound, she said.

"THIS AREA CAN'T afford more sprawl," said Lorna McEwen, a member of the Bloomfield Township-based EMEAC and co-president of Concerned Citizens for West Bloomfield. Both EMEAC and Concerned Citizens are opposing a state transportation department proposal to expand Haggerty Road or supplement it with a larger, limited access roadway in order to reduce traffic congestion.

Johnson said there is a need for

legislation to require developers to pay some infrastructure costs. For example, after The Palace of Auburn Hills was built, there were calls for road improvements to ease the monumental traffic tie-ups outside the facility.

"All of a sudden we have to come up with a whole lot of money to provide road improvements to move cars off I-75," she said.

Johnson said developer impact fees would shift some cost burdens to developers and users of a development. But the state Legislature failed in a recent attempt to put impact fees into law, she said.

Make the developer chip in

By Brian Lysaght
staff writer

"There is no way we will be able to lay enough road to get ourselves out of traffic gridlock," says Peggy Johnson, a local environmentalist.

Johnson said the commute from her Oakland Township home to work in Utica would take 20 minutes. Now it takes 40.

The way out of stalled traffic is not more and bigger roads but more sensible development, she said. Political officials must reconsider options like regional transportation, car pooling and better planned communities. Towns should be designed to allow residents to walk from home to stores, work and schools, she said.

Johnson, a member of the East Michigan Environmental Action Council advisory board, said she is concerned with suburban sprawl. People are moving further north and west from former population centers. Detroit and its older suburbs, abandoning one infrastructure — roads, sewers, buildings — while creating another.

"We not only have throwaway bottles, we have throwaway cities," she said.

So how about that Oakland County traffic?



"It gets hectic, real hectic at 5 p.m. when I come in to work at Hogan's restaurant (Maple and Telegraph). Changing the timing on the lights, making them longer, might help."

— Bruce Williams
Detroit



"Maple Road west of Telegraph is bad and Maple at Orchard Lake I try to avoid on weekends."

— Suzan Curhan
Birmingham



"I don't think they planned well enough for the flow of traffic at Square Lake and Telegraph. There aren't enough warning signs."

— Jay Blitznick
Pontiac



"Telegraph is terrible! Jodi doesn't like traffic either."

— Nancy Amholz
West Bloomfield



"The construction company doing work on Square Lake Road has traffic all backed up, especially at rush hour. I can't even get into my neighborhood, and a lot of people are getting upset."

— Lisa Perez
Bloomfield Township



"It helps to know the entertainment schedules at The Palace and Pina Knob so you can avoid show traffic."

— Jeff Fletcher
Waterford Township