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POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

Democrats propose ‘paradigm shift’ in NC transportation spending. Rough road ahead?

BY RICHARD STRADLING

UPDATED APRIL 12, 2023 5:47 PM





A cyclist uses the Neuse River Trail, part of the East Coast Greenway system on June 15, 2021, in Raleigh. Some lawmakers want to make more state money available for bike and pedestrian projects in North Carolina.

ROBERT WILLETT rwillett@newsobserver.com



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DURHAM

The N.C. Department of Transportation spends about \$5 billion a year building and maintaining a transportation system based primarily on cars and trucks.

Some lawmakers want to change the state's priorities, giving more say to local communities that want to shift transportation dollars toward transit and projects that would benefit pedestrians and cyclists.

They've introduced bills in the House and Senate that they call the [Transportation for the Future Act](#). Among other things, the bills would alter the formula NCDOT uses to allocate money, requiring that at least 20% go to non-highway projects.

"We would stop prioritizing endless expansion of highways at the expense of all other modes of transportation," Sen. Graig Meyer of Orange County said at a press conference Wednesday. "North Carolina currently dedicates 94% of our

transportation funding to highways. And this act lifts the current artificial limitations that we have in place on rail, transit, bike and pedestrian facilities.”

The state’s current system of highways and roads works best for rural and suburban areas but isn’t a good fit for urban areas that want alternatives, said Leonardo Williams, a Durham City Council member who joined Meyer and others. Williams called the bills a “paradigm shift.”

“We can no longer take a one-size-fits-all approach to transit and getting people around,” he said in an interview. “Urban areas are evolving, so our needs are evolving.”

Most of the primary sponsors of the bills, including Meyer, Sen. Natalie Murdock, Rep. Vernetta Alston and Rep. Allen Buansi, are from the Triangle. They say the proposed changes in state law reflect what transportation planners in Durham and Orange counties are trying to do locally.

Last year, the [Durham-Chapel Hill-Carrboro Metropolitan Planning Organization](#) or MPO approved a 30-year plan that eliminated some long-anticipated highway projects in favor of spending more on transit as well as bike lanes, crosswalks and sidewalks used by cyclists and pedestrians. The MPO board said [the change in emphasis better supported its goals](#) of eliminating fatal crashes, reducing carbon emissions to zero and ensuring that everyone has access to affordable transportation.

But the Transportation for the Future Act is not likely to win favor with a majority of state lawmakers. Twenty-two House members and five senators have signed on as sponsors, but all of them are Democrats in a General Assembly dominated by Republicans.

Republican House Speaker Tim Moore made it clear he favors increasing road capacity when he criticized a transportation plan drafted by Charlotte. The city proposed spending too much on light rail, buses and bike lanes and not enough on building more lanes for cars, Moore said after an appearance before a Charlotte business group in January.

“If you put more bike lanes in, that doesn’t mean more people are going to ride their bikes to work — that’s not going to happen,” Moore said, [according to Charlotte NPR station WFAE](#). “You need to build and expand roads because we are driving cars.”

Neither Moore nor Senate Leader Phil Berger responded to a request for comment about the Transportation for the Future Act.

SPONSORS WILL LOOK FOR REPUBLICAN SUPPORT

Other provisions in the bills include:

- Changing the criteria that NCDOT uses to prioritize transportation projects. The bill would add “environmental quality” to the list and eliminate “congestion” and the width of lanes and shoulders on existing roadways.
- Allowing county governments to seek permission from voters to enact a sales tax of up to 1% for public transportation projects. The law currently limits the size of the local option tax for transportation to 0.25%, except in six urban counties where it’s 0.5%.
- Eliminate a provision that bars NCDOT from spending non-federal money on pedestrian and bicycle projects that aren’t tied to road improvements for cars.

While no Republicans have signed on to the bills, Meyer said the sponsors would meet with them behind closed doors to see if there are parts they could support in some form. He noted in particular growing support for lifting the decade-old restriction on spending for pedestrian and bicycle projects.

But Meyer acknowledged that changing how the state allocates money for transportation will take time.

“We have to provide visionary options for future consideration and start conversations,” he said. “We need to start this conversation with other planning organizations and communities all over the state and have them think about how this can benefit them. And they can talk to their local legislators and, over the course of a few years, we can get this done. It’ll just take a little while.”

This story was originally published April 12, 2023, 5:29 PM.

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Richard Stradling covers transportation for The News & Observer. Planes, trains and automobiles, plus ferries, bicycles, scooters and just plain walking. Also, hospitals during the coronavirus outbreak. He's been a reporter or editor for 35 years, including the last 23 at The N&O. 919-829-4739, rstradling@newsobserver.com.



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Pedestrian deaths spiked in Raleigh last year. Why? And what can be done to fix it?

The number of people on foot who were killed on Raleigh roads last year was triple the city's average over the past 16 years. The reason for the surge is hard to identify. TRAVIS LONG TLONG@NEWSOBSERVER.COM

By [Richard Stradling](#)

Updated April 07, 2023 2:22 PM

The number of people on foot who were killed on Raleigh roads last year was triple the city's average over the past 16 years.





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Pedestrian deaths on the rise

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Raleigh

Diane Marie Bass, 59, was walking on the shoulder of Capital Boulevard before dawn on an August Sunday morning when the driver of an SUV drifted off the road and hit her going 55 mph.

Ronge Mwanakyungu, 27, was attempting to cross a stretch of New Bern Avenue that lacks street lights and crosswalks shortly after 8 p.m. in late November when a car hit him.

And Samantha Briggs was [hit about 7:30 p.m. the day after Thanksgiving](#) as she and four others attempted to cross a dark stretch of Hillsborough Street after a trip to a Sheetz convenience store. Police say the driver swerved into the center turn lane where Briggs was standing and kept driving. She was 12.

Bass, Mwanakyungu and Briggs were among 27 pedestrians hit and killed in Raleigh last year. Two others died on highways just yards outside the city limits.

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AD



The number of people hit and killed while on foot is a growing national problem. [Nearly 7,500 pedestrians died nationwide](#) in 2021, according to the Governors Highway Safety Association. That’s up 74% since 2010 and was the most pedestrians killed in a single year in the U.S. in four decades.

But last year’s toll in Raleigh was particularly striking. The 27 fatalities handled by the Raleigh Police Department was more than three times the annual average since 2006, according to the N.C. Division of Motor Vehicles.

“The number should be zero,” says Jonathan Melton, a City Council member who has spoken out about the need to improve pedestrian safety.

Pedestrians killed in Raleigh

The number of people hit and killed while walking in the city spiked last year.

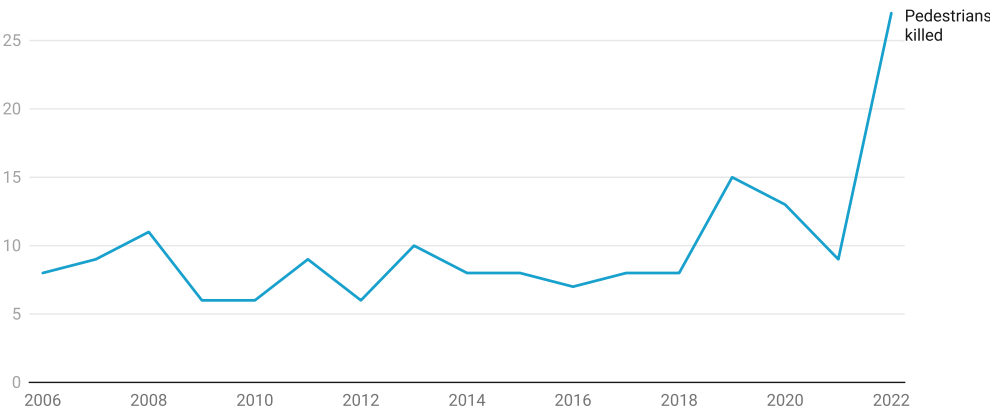


Chart: Richard Stradling • Source: NC DMV; Raleigh Police Department • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

There’s no simple explanation for the rise in pedestrian deaths. Those who work in highway safety or respond to crashes cite a number of factors that may contribute, including cellphones and digital dashboards that distract drivers; the popularity of SUVs and other large vehicles that are more likely to kill a person they hit; changes in traffic patterns during the pandemic that allow drivers to go faster; and a growing number of people walking on roads that weren’t built with them in mind.

“There’s really a lot going on,” said Laura Sandt, director of the Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center at [UNC’s Highway Safety Research Center in Chapel Hill](#). “It’s a very complex issue, and what we see are changes at the nexus of people and vehicles on roads that weren’t really designed for people and vehicles to be interacting.”



A Christmas tree was placed at the scene where Samantha Briggs was hit about 7:30 p.m. the day after Thanksgiving as she and four others attempted to cross a dark stretch of Hillsborough Street after a trip to a Sheetz convenience store. Police say the driver swerved into the center turn lane where Briggs was standing and kept driving. She was 12. Travis Long tlong@newsobserver.com

The circumstances around each fatal crash involving a pedestrian differed last year, but there are patterns. Only seven of the 29 fatalities in and around Raleigh took place during the day; the rest occurred after dark, when drivers may be drowsy, impaired or simply have a harder time seeing what’s ahead but often drive faster because there’s less traffic.

Speed is another common factor. Three people were killed in parking lots and a fourth [during the Raleigh Christmas parade](#). Twenty-one of the remaining 25 were hit on roads where the speed limit was 45 mph or higher, including five on interstate highways.

Road planners and builders need to do a better job of delineating when a road is a highway built for speed and when it’s a street where pedestrians are present, says Shaileen Bhatt, the Federal Highway Administrator.

“The data is incontrovertible: When you get speeds below 20 mph, crashes with pedestrians will result in injuries, not in fatalities,” Bhatt said in an interview. “When you get over 25, 30 mph, you’re not going to the hospital, you’re going to the morgue. So if you want cities to feel like they’re more welcoming to pedestrians, we need to reduce speeds inside the cities.”

Raleigh is doing that on neighborhood streets and downtown where large numbers of people walk. The city is gradually reducing speed limits on residential streets to 30 or 25 mph and [installing speed humps and other measures where compliance](#)

[remains poor](#). Last fall, the City Council voted to [lower the speed limit to 25 mph](#) on all downtown streets, including through streets such as Dawson and McDowell.

But so far there's little talk about lowering speed limits on the four- and six-lane thoroughfares that carry the bulk of the traffic around the sprawling, 150-square-mile city. Drivers expect to go at least 45 mph on roads such as Glenwood Avenue, Six Forks Road and Capital Boulevard even when those streets are lined with homes, stores, restaurants, hotels and apartment complexes where people walk.

These are the roads where most pedestrians are killed in Raleigh. In a single one-mile stretch of Capital Boulevard in North Raleigh, five people were hit and killed last year.

Diane Bass was one of them.



A pedestrian crosses the same portion of Capital Blvd. where Diane Marie Bass, 59, was walking on the shoulder before dawn on an August Sunday morning when the driver of an SUV drifted off the road and hit her going 55 mph. Travis Long tlong@newsobserver.com

HIT FROM BEHIND WHILE WALKING ON THE SHOULDER

Bass was supposed to usher at her church, [Christ First Christian Fellowship](#) off Jones Franklin Road, on the morning she was hit.

"We wondered where she was," said parishioner Wayne Terry. "And then we got the call."

Bass was a faithful volunteer at the church, where she was known for her upbeat demeanor and the collard greens and fried chicken she brought to church suppers. She was also a regular at the [Round Table Fellowship at Pullen Baptist Church](#), which provides a meal for those who need it two afternoons a week. She would eat,

then help with cleanup, said Jim McMahan, a volunteer who knew Bass for several years.

“She was a very hard worker,” McMahan said. “She would kind of stake out certain areas of the kitchen that were her responsibility, usually cleaning. And she would clean everything spic and span.”



Diane Bass Tyler Cunningham Photography *Through Our Eyes Project-Raleigh*

Bass did all this even though she was mostly homeless. She would sometimes take cooking and cleaning jobs that provided a place to stay, but she would inevitably end up back outside in various secluded spots off Capital Boulevard, said Rev. Larry Snead, the pastor at Christ First Christian Fellowship.

“It almost seemed like she thrived out there in her tent and on her own and with the individuals that she knew in her community,” Snead said. “I don’t fully understand it, but she was always drawn back out there.”

Bass didn’t have a car and relied on the bus or rides from church members to get around. And she walked along and across some of the busiest roads in the Triangle. She had been hit twice before in North Raleigh, Snead and McMahan said, once requiring a trip to the hospital for a leg injury.

Still, she wasn’t worried about being hit again, said Lakeisha Bass, one of her three grown children.

“She loved to walk. She loved to ride her bike, catch the bus. She liked to move on her time,” Bass said. “And each accident actually wasn’t her fault. It was just people not paying attention to what was in front of them.”

Lakeisha Bass said her mother may have been walking to a convenience store after a late night at a nearby sweepstakes parlor the morning she was killed. It was 2:36 a.m., according to Raleigh police, and she was walking north along a darkened stretch of Capital near Calvary Drive, just up an embankment from where she was living in a secluded clearing. Her death certificate says she died at the address where she lived, 4400 Capital Blvd.

It’s not clear why the 21-year-old driver drifted off the road and hit Bass, propelling her over the guardrail. Police cited “inattention” and charged him with misdemeanor death by motor vehicle.

Snead said he worried about Bass living alone in a tent and getting around on foot.

“I think in general she learned how to maneuver out there. But that place is dangerous, just the whole Capital Boulevard strip,” Snead said. “I see people trying to run across there, maneuver across there, and there’s just a lot of traffic, a lot of lanes there, to maneuver if you don’t know what you’re doing. Or even if you know what you’re doing.”



A pedestrian walks across multiple lanes of S. Wilmington Street near Chapanoke Road avoiding a marked cross walk on Wednesday, January 18, 2023 in Raleigh, N.C. Robert Willett rwillett@newsobserver.com

FIXES PLANNED FOR TWO PROBLEM AREAS

The city and the N.C. Department of Transportation are aware of the problems on Capital. They review crash data and meet monthly to talk about hazardous locations and what might be done to improve them, said Sean Driskill, director the city's new [Vision Zero traffic safety program](#).

In mapping where pedestrians and cyclists have been killed or seriously injured in recent years, Driskill said, there's a clear correlation with areas where census data shows households are less likely to own a car, including neighborhoods along Capital Boulevard.

“We’ve seen in areas where people don’t have vehicles that there’s more serious pedestrian injuries and fatalities,” he said.

The intersection of Capital and Calvary is one of several across the state where NCDOT will soon test relatively easy, low-cost strategies for protecting pedestrians, said Ryan Brumfield, who heads the department’s [Integrated Mobility Division](#). These entail a combination of paint, hard plastic posts and curb extensions to shorten the length of the crosswalks and force cars to make sharper right turns.

“We expect the treatments to reduce vehicle turning speeds and reduce pedestrian crossing distance, ultimately leading to less exposure and safer conditions for pedestrians,” Brumfield wrote in an email.

Another problem area that the city and NCDOT are working to fix is the intersection of New Bern Avenue and Hedingham Boulevard near where two pedestrians were killed last year on Raleigh’s east side. New Bern Avenue is eight lanes wide here, including turn lanes, but there are no crosswalks, sidewalks or street lights.

The design of the intersection likely dates back to when it was still a semi-rural area, outside the city and beyond where pedestrians were considered, said John Grant, NCDOT’s regional traffic engineer. That design hasn’t changed with the building of a hotel, restaurants and a Walmart Super Center nearby.

“As we continue to sprawl like this, we’ll encounter, unfortunately, developed locations that are like this,” Grant said. “It’s not anything that we’re striving to do, but we’re trying to identify these and correct them as we can.”

Grant said NCDOT and the city are seeking more than \$2 million to extend sidewalks and add crosswalks and street lights at the intersection, but there’s not enough money available for these kinds of projects to keep up with demand statewide.

NCDOT would have more money for these kind of fixes if state law didn’t forbid it from spending non-federal money on pedestrian and bicycle projects that aren’t tied to road improvements for cars, said Terry Lansdell, executive director of [BikeWalk NC](#), an advocacy group. Two bills now before the General Assembly would lift that decade-old restriction, but lawmakers have rejected similar efforts in the past.

“So when it comes down to investing in safety improvements, the state legislature said ‘No, it’s not important,’” Lansdell said. “And DOT and our present governor have said that’s the way it is, that cars rule and everybody else needs to fend for themselves.”

TAKING HUMAN BEHAVIOR INTO ACCOUNT

Another challenge for those seeking to protect pedestrians is that few fatalities take place at intersections, where improvements to crosswalks might make a difference.

Of the 29 people killed while walking in and around Raleigh last year, only four were at intersections, only two of which had crosswalks with signals.

If people cross a busy road away from an intersection, it may be because they had no choice; the nearest crosswalks to where 12-year-old Samantha Briggs was killed on Hillsborough Street were more than a mile away in either direction, down a darkened road with no sidewalks.

It may also reflect poor judgment, a mistaken belief they could get across before the next car comes. Drivers in several of these incidents made mistakes, too. Police cited drivers in at least nine cases, including five with DWI.

Sandt, the UNC highway safety researcher, said the solution is not to blame people but to plan for their mistakes. That means designing roads and cars with human fallibility in mind.

“The approach is to create environments where it’s harder to make a mistake or where if you make a mistake it’s not as harmful,” she said.

Toward that end, Raleigh recently created its Vision Zero program, following a national movement of local programs to [improve driving safety with the stated goal of zero deaths](#). The city won an \$800,000 federal [Safe Streets and Roads for All grant](#) to plan safety improvements, which will eventually make it eligible for up to \$30 million to carry them out.

Raleigh embarks on its Vision Zero quest just after its worst year for traffic fatalities in recent memory. More than 60 people were killed in crashes last year, nearly double the average over the most recent five years. Of those, more than 40% were pedestrians.

Melton, the City Council member, said despite those numbers, the city’s new program will put it on the right path.

“How the city responds is most indicative of what it says about that city,” he said, “And I think we are taking the steps to respond appropriately.”

Pedestrians killed in North Carolina

The number of people hit and killed while walking in the state rose 67% in the decade ending 2021.

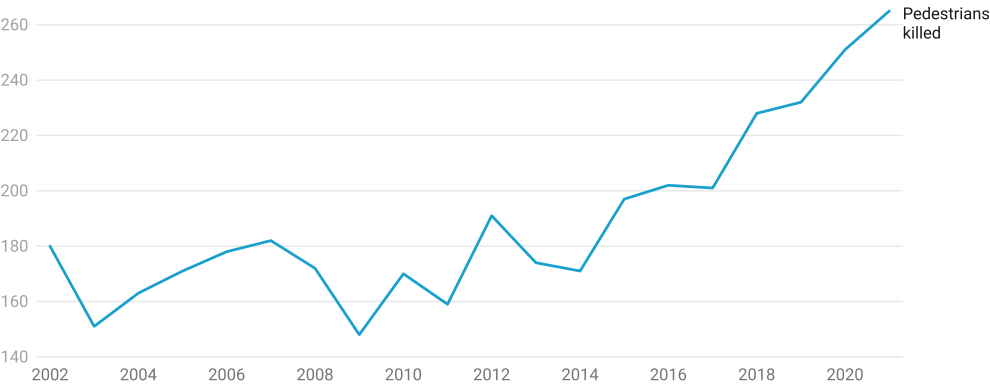


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This story was originally published April 7, 2023, 5:00 AM.

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Authors

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Publication Date

2023

DOI

10.7922/G22805Z9

Increasing Highway Capacity Induces More Auto Travel

Jamey Volker and Susan Handy
University of California, Davis

January 2023

Issue

Building additional roadway capacity—via constructing entirely new roadways or extending or adding lanes to existing roadways—is often proposed as a solution to traffic congestion and even as a way to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. The logic for the latter is that increasing roadway capacity increases average vehicle speeds, which improves vehicle fuel efficiency and reduces per-mile emissions of GHGs and local air pollutants. But that logic relies on the flawed assumption that the amount that people drive does not change when the time it takes to drive places changes. In fact, the amount that people drive does respond to changes in driving times.

The basic economic principles of supply and demand explain this phenomenon. Adding capacity increases the average travel speed on the roadway (at least in the short term),

improves travel time reliability, makes driving on the roadway safer or less stressful, or provides access to previously inaccessible areas. All of these reduce the perceived “cost” of driving. And when the cost of driving goes down, the quantity of driving goes up (Figure 1).

Empirical research demonstrates that as roadway supply increases, vehicle miles traveled (VMT) generally do, too. This is the “induced travel” effect—a net increase in VMT across the roadway network due to an increase in roadway capacity, which ultimately erodes any initial increases in travel speeds and causes increased GHG emissions.

Researchers at the University of California, Davis reviewed the empirical research on induced travel to understand the likely effects of adding roadway capacity in a variety of contexts.

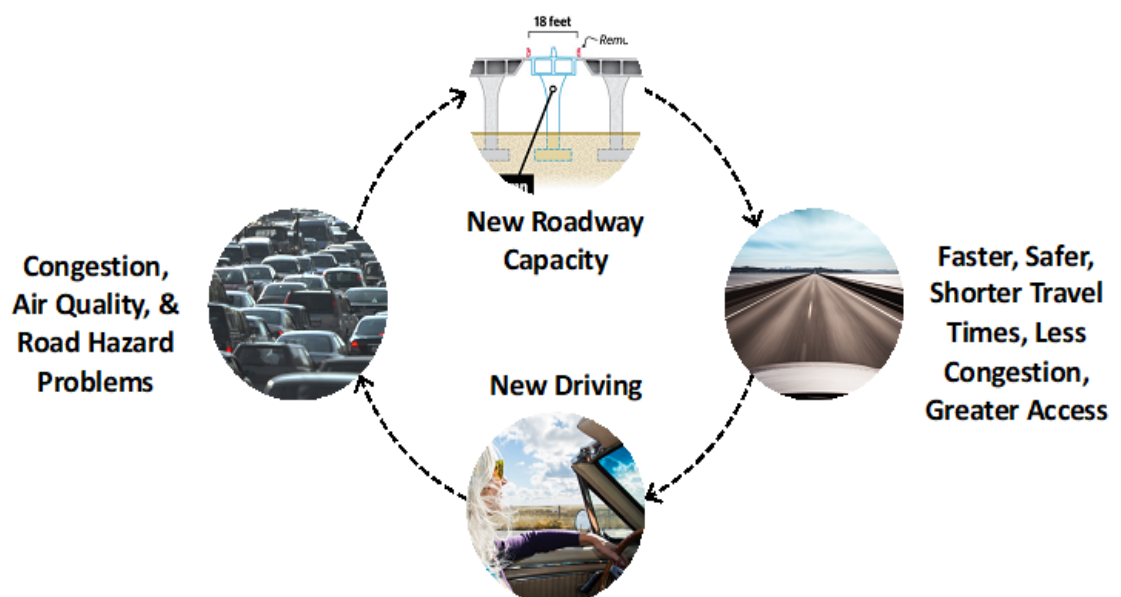


Figure 1. A conceptual illustration of the induced travel effect in response to roadway capacity expansion

Key Research Findings

The quality of the evidence linking highway capacity expansion to increased VMT is high. All 12 studies reviewed used time-series data and sophisticated statistical techniques to estimate the effect of increased capacity on VMT. All studies also controlled for other factors that might also affect VMT, such as population changes, income changes, geographic effects, and time period effects. Most studies were from the US, but studies from other countries produced similar findings.

A roadway capacity expansion of 10% is likely to increase VMT by 3% to 8% in the short-run and 8% to 10% or more in the long-run. Increased capacity can lead to increased VMT in the short-run in several ways: if people shift from other modes to driving, if people shift from carpooling to driving solo, if drivers make longer trips (by choosing longer routes and/or more distant destinations), or if drivers make more frequent trips. In the longer term, increased capacity can lead people to live farther away from where they work (or vice versa), cause businesses to relocate to more distant locations, and even spur commercial or residential growth in the region. The reviewed studies indicate that the full impact of capacity expansion on VMT materializes within 3 to 10 years. The studies mostly focused on major roadways (including interstates, other freeways and expressways, principal arterials, and minor arterials) and show a potentially greater effect for interstates. Expansions of collector streets and local roads are also likely to induce VMT, though the empirical evidence as to the relative magnitude of the effect is limited.

Capacity expansion leads to a net increase in VMT, not simply a shift in VMT from one road to another. Is it possible that the additional traffic on the new or widened highway is simply traffic that shifted from slower and more congested roads, meaning that overall VMT does not actually increase? The evidence suggests a resounding “no.” For example, one study found “no conclusive evidence that increases in state highway lane-miles have affected traffic on

other roads,” while a more recent study concluded that “increasing lane kilometers for one type of road diverts little traffic from other types of roads.”

The available empirical evidence suggests that new high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) and high-occupancy toll (HOT) lanes might have similar induced travel effects as general-purpose lane expansions. One recent study looked at two projects that added HOV lanes and one that added an HOT lane and showed that the additions resulted in increased traffic flows at similar levels to new general-purpose lanes. Other available evidence tends to support this conclusion. However, more research is needed to better understand any differences in effect between general-purpose, HOV, HOT, and traditional toll lanes.

Induced travel happens in rural and uncongested areas, too. Research shows that induced travel occurs in both urban and rural areas and on roadways with different levels of existing congestion. Indeed, induced travel can be expected to occur anytime a project increases average travel speed, improves travel time reliability, makes driving on the roadway perceptibly safer or less stressful, or provides access to previously inaccessible areas. However, the induced travel effect might be slightly smaller in rural areas, at least in the short run. Conversely, the limited available evidence indicates that relative increases in VMT following roadway expansion may be smaller in metropolitan areas with higher baseline levels of congestion than in those with less congestion.

More Information

This policy brief is drawn from “Updating the Induced Travel Calculator,” a report from the National Center for Sustainable Transportation, authored by Jamey Volker and Susan Handy of the University of California, Davis. The full report can be found on the NCST website at <https://ncst.ucdavis.edu/project/induced-travel-calculator-improvements>.

For more information about the findings presented in this brief, contact Jamey Volker at jvolker@ucdavis.edu.

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