



# VIEWPOINT

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## Ohio's Growing Congestion can be Managed

by Samuel R. Staley, Ph.D.

### Summary

All Ohio metropolitan areas are experiencing rising congestion, but this congestion can be managed if policymakers act now. The keys to managing congestion will be ensuring new road capacity keeps pace with travel demand and managing peak-hour road use more effectively through electronic tolling.

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More and more Ohioans are complaining about rising traffic congestion. The data say they have a point.

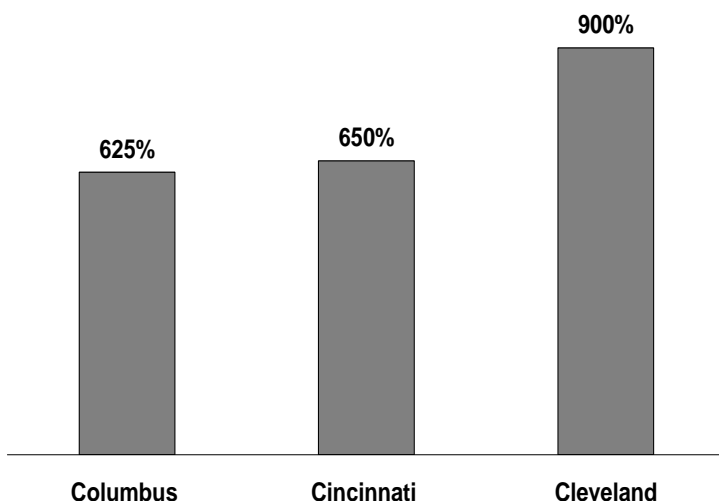
The Texas Transportation Institute reports that traffic congestion is on the rise in every major metropolitan area. In Ohio, the most dramatic increases occurred in Cincinnati and Columbus, where travelers went from just 4 hours of delay on average each year in 1982 to 30 hours in 2003. That ranks Cincinnati and Columbus's congestion up there with Phoenix, Houston, New York, San Jose, and Tampa Bay.

Cleveland, Dayton, Toledo, and Akron all experienced more modest increases and now face 11 hours of travel delay annually.

These increases are slower than most other American metropolitan areas, but policymakers shouldn't ignore the trends. And that's where the controversy lies.

Anti-sprawl and anti-car interest groups continue to push public transit. Unfortunately, the numbers simply don't support this as a viable option in Ohio. Too few people ride transit, even in the big cities like Cleveland, Cincinnati, and Columbus, and the trends are down. Express buses might help move some people more easily, but the number will be relatively small.

Change in Hours of Delay in Major Metropolitan Areas: 1982 to 2003



Source: David Shrank and Tim Lomax, *2005 Urban Mobility Report*, Texas Transportation Institute, Texas A & M University.

So, what should Ohio policymakers do?

First, they should let the data tell the story. Congestion has been rising, but it has not become so widespread that Ohioans face perpetual gridlock. We are not Los Angeles. Congestion is concentrated in our major cities and around certain periods of the day—an hour or two at the beginning and the end of rush hour.

Second, we can't afford to lag in our highway investments. The researchers at The Texas Transportation Institute note that the cities that keep road investment on pace with travel demand do a better job in managing their growth in congestion than those that don't.

Third, policymakers should recognize public transit will have a limited impact on congestion in the short and intermediate term. The vast majority of Ohioans remain committed to their cars. This is logical, practical, and efficient.

Using public transit in Ohio means commuters add 15 to 20 minutes to their trip compared to traveling by car according to the U.S. Bureau of the Census. In fact, the average work trip takes almost twice as long in the Cleveland-Akron metropolitan area despite having the most extensive array of transit options in the state, including rail. Until transit can become a proven, cost-effective time saver, its ability to reduce congestion will be limited.

Thus, as a practical matter, the keys to keeping Ohio's highways flowing efficiently will be twofold: Make needed highway investments and manage peak-hour traffic more efficiently. The Ohio Department of Transportation's 10-year, \$5.6 billion new capacity and safety program goes a long way toward addressing the first of these priorities.

The second strategy, managing peak-hour traffic, is more difficult. In the end, we will have to change driving behavior by making highway consumers pay a higher price for using roadways during peak times than in other, non-rush hour times. In other words, we will need to "price" road use more effectively.

Here, Ohio might take its queues, oddly enough, from London, England and Southern California. London faces severe congestion in its central district. To regulate flows into and out of its highly congested central district, the city imposed tolls. The result was a 30 percent drop in travel delay during the first year.

On this side of the pond, Orange County began an experiment converting high-occupancy vehicle lanes to toll lanes in the mid-1990s. They've found the toll lanes are both popular and effective in generating revenue to fund needed improvements.

Electronic tolling will not be an easy sell in Ohio, but if London, Southern California, Toronto, and other places that have experimented with contemporary, electronic tolling are any indication, the Ohio public will embrace these changes once they see the benefits.

Changing our driving behavior to more efficiently use existing road capacity will forestall significant expenses down the road and more accurately reflect the true price of using our highways at specific times of day. Congestion pricing, in particular, "is a proven congestion buster" notes U.S. Department of Transportation policy director Jeffrey Shane. It's worth the political risk.

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