

Transportation

Principles:

- Traffic congestion, while inconvenient, is a sign of a thriving economy.
- Transportation policy must focus on improving mobility and relieving congestion.
- To the extent possible, users should pay.
- Use objective criteria when weighing transportation options.

Recommendations:

- Embrace funding alternatives.
- Expand the metro Atlanta express toll lanes into a seamless network.
- Improve arterial mobility and add managed arterials.
- Develop alternative freight routes.
- Adopt transit solutions that are flexible and adaptable.
- Facilitate first- and last-mile destination solutions for mobility.
- Plan for a future of transportation innovations.
- Include Georgia's research universities in solutions.

Facts:

COVID-19 upended all aspects of life, including the transportation system. In Georgia, however, the number of daily vehicle miles traveled (VMT) recovered to 90% of its pre-pandemic total by July 2020, and was expected to continue to increase. Urban transit usage, which declined by 50-75% from its pre-pandemic levels, was not expected to recover until at least 2022.

Before the COVID-19 outbreak, metro Atlanta, which is home to about 60% of Georgia's population, had the nation's tenth-worst traffic congestion, according to INRIX, a provider of transportation data.¹ Between 2018 and 2019, traffic congestion increased 9%. In metro Atlanta, commuters spend an average of 82 hours sitting in congestion, with approximately 10% of all driving time spent sitting in congestion.

The large amount of time drivers waste sitting in congestion is financially and emotionally taxing, negatively affecting quality of life.

Even before COVID-19, the region's access to transit was limited. A study from the Brookings Institution notes that just 38% of working-age metro Atlanta residents have access to transit, and that only 22% of jobs are accessible within 90 minutes.² In Augusta, just 30% of working-age residents had access to transit, with only 16% of jobs transit-accessible. Low-income residents without access to transportation lose economic opportunity.

Given the Atlanta region's rapid population growth, simply adding general lane capacity is not the best way to solve congestion. Given the region's low density, sprawl and multiple job centers, adding rail transit is not the best way to connect people with jobs, either.

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The best way to provide a non-congested option to commuters is through variably priced managed lanes. These are toll lanes whose rates change according to congestion levels in general-purpose lanes or, in

¹ <https://inrix.com/scorecard/>

² <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Series/jobs-and-transit/AtlantaGA.PDF>

some cases, the time of day. These priced lanes also enhance the attractiveness of express bus and bus rapid transit, which are cost-effective transit options badly needed in the region's suburbs.

Managed lanes debuted in metro Atlanta in 1994 as high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes open to vehicles with two or more occupants, alternative-fuel vehicles and motorcycles. But HOV lanes suffer from the "goldilocks phenomenon." They are either underused, leading to resentment from motorists in the general purpose lanes, or overused, leading to similar trip times as the general purpose lanes. As a result, Georgia is in the process of adding new priced lanes and converting some HOV lanes to tolled lanes.

The Transportation Funding Act of 2015 is expected to raise almost \$1 billion annually for transportation projects statewide.³ Among its measures, the law converted the taxes on motor fuel to a 26-cent statewide excise tax dedicated to transportation. It also addressed concerns that regional transportation special-purpose local option sales tax (T-SPLOST) proposals were too broad by allowing a county T-SPLOST. It enabled a fractional sales tax and imposed a user fee of \$200 for alternative-fuel automobiles.

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Driving remains the most popular commute mode in metro Atlanta, where 85.4% of workers drive. While almost 9% (8.9%) of these commuters carpool, the remainder of the 85.4% drive alone. Working at home has the second-highest mode share, at 7.9%, and is expected to grow significantly due to behavior changes resulting from COVID-19. In fact, more than twice as many people work at home as use transit, which makes up 3.4% of the total. Walking (1.3%) and cycling (0.2%) have very small shares of the commute.⁴

Recommendations

Embrace funding alternatives

Major capital projects should be financed over the lifetime of the infrastructure. These projects require both funding, which is the revenue needed to pay for the project, and financing, the means of acquiring that revenue. Public-private partnerships (P3s) use private investors and developers to leverage additional financial resources that reduce the amount of funding needed. P3s also assign responsibilities to the party best able to manage a specific element. For example, the public sector handles land acquisition while the private sector handles financial risk. Tolled roads and lanes are particularly good P3 projects because the toll provides a dedicated funding source. Dynamic tolling helps reduce congestion by motivating motorists to gauge the value of their trip route and time.

The private sector contracting of mass transit services has proven to save money for Gwinnett, Cobb and the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority, and future contracts need to be competitively bid. Suburban transit providers also need to increase their service as metro Atlanta's population increases. Outsourcing paratransit and other demand-response systems are another option. Increasingly around the nation, local governments are stepping back to hire Uber and similar ride-share services to serve their paratransit needs and save taxpayer dollars.

Expand the metro Atlanta express toll lanes into a seamless network

Variably priced express toll lanes are now operating in Georgia along I-75/I-575 North, I-75 South and I-85 North. Land acquisition and pre-engineering activities are under way for express lanes on Georgia 400 North and along the northern end of I-285. Reversible express toll lanes operate along I-75/575 North and I-75 South. State plans include new toll lanes on I-285 from I-85 North to I-20 East and from I-75 North to I-20 West.

³ HB 170, <http://www.legis.ga.gov/Legislation/en-US/display/20152016/HB/170>

⁴ <http://commuting.blog.ajc.com/2015/10/12/working-from-home-tops-transit-in-atlanta/>

The Foundation has long advocated for a seamless network of toll lanes around metro Atlanta.⁵ As stated before, dynamic tolls help pay for these corridors *and* reduce congestion by motivating motorists to gauge the value of their route and timing of their trip. Expanding the lanes to a comprehensive, seamless network provides a guaranteed trip time.

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Even better, the lanes serve as a virtual transit network – a busway – that facilitates express bus service, improves transit trip times and makes transit more attractive and far-reaching for workers across the metro Atlanta area. An added incentive for motorists is that Georgia’s Peach Pass electronic tolling pass is expanding reciprocity and is already accepted in North Carolina and Florida. Unfortunately, the Peach Pass is still not compatible with the larger EZ Pass accepted in the Northeast and Midwest.

Improve arterial mobility

Georgia’s lack of attention to an arterial network is particularly evident during rush hours and the run-up to vacations. While interstate on-ramps are often clogged and prone to traffic crashes, many side streets remain winding, two-lane roads not suitable as alternative routes for a metro area with almost 6 million people. During holidays, special events and rush hours the interstates clog up; the shortage of viable alternative arterial roads is one reason congestion is so severe. Almost 60% of daily vehicle miles traveled are on metro Atlanta freeways. A balanced metro area would have 50% of vehicle travel on interstates and 50% on arterials. Numerous studies have shown Atlanta to have one of the most deficient arterial highway networks of any major city in the country. Yet action by state and local transportation agencies has been painfully slow. Continuing to delay resolution or ignore this mobility challenge will limit future economic growth.

Over the past 15 years, since the Foundation first pointed out the flaw, some counties have made minor improvements including better traffic light signalization, longer turn lanes, flashing yellow turn signals and continuous turn lanes. Other arterial lanes, however, have fallen victim to “road diets,” in which sidewalks are widened, medians are built, bicycle lanes are added, speed bumps and humps are inserted, and lane capacity shrinks. This may be a community or planners’ decision. The big picture consequence, however, can be a hindrance to regional mobility and, in some cases, public safety by slowing emergency vehicles.

Develop alternative freight routes

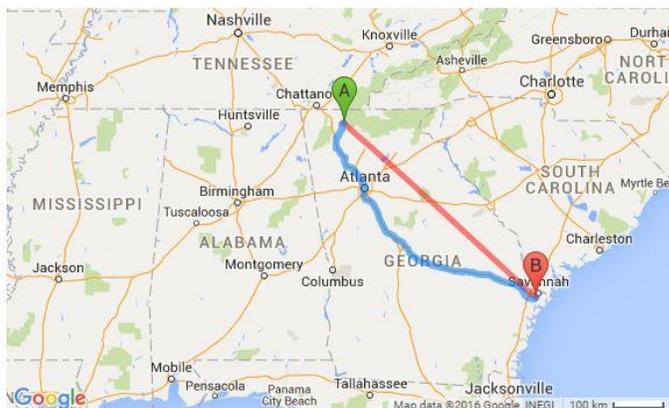
Georgia’s interstate highways were designed to funnel traffic through Atlanta, including vehicles that neither start nor end their trip in the metro area. A significant amount of the truck traffic on metro Atlanta interstates is passing through the region. Additionally, the continued growth of the Savannah port is forecast to more than double truck traffic in the state over the next 30 years.

Georgia must focus on enhancing roads and limited-access highways to accommodate freight and divert unnecessary freight truck traffic away from metro Atlanta. Enhancing the state’s freight highway network will improve capacity on metro area highways and distribute economic opportunity across the state as truckers relocate and the associated industries and services follow.

There are two types of enhancements: rail and road. One rail example is the intermodal inland port in Murray County on U.S. Highway 411. Trucks load and offload containers that make the 388-mile trip between the port and Georgia Port Authority’s Garden City Terminal outside Savannah by rail.

Another rail example is the Cordele Intermodal Terminal, which helps reduce truck traffic in Savannah and Brunswick by enabling cargo to be transferred to and from trains in Cordele. It can also reduce Atlanta-area truck traffic because loads can be broken down and distributed from South Georgia and shipped to southwest Georgia, southern Alabama and western Florida.

⁵ <http://www.georgiapolicy.org/2004/08/agenda-2005-a-guide-to-the-issues/>



Opened in 2018, the Murray County inland port will reduce truck traffic flowing through Atlanta by transporting via rail to and from Savannah's port.

A highway improvement opportunity exists in the four-lane U.S. 27 corridor that parallels the Georgia-Alabama border from Tennessee to Florida.⁶ As an expressway with a limited number of at-grade crossings and traffic lights, the highway could serve as a viable alternative for truck traffic that would avoid Atlanta's congested interstates. It could also help "snow birds" and other leisure travelers from north of Georgia heading to and from Florida to bypass Atlanta.

Other improvements to consider:

- U.S. 129 between Macon and Eatonton and U.S. 441 between Eatonton and Commerce, to provide an eastern bypass.
- A four-lane, east-west expressway connecting Rome, Ball Ground, Gainesville and Commerce would also ease movement.

These enhancements, along with the four-lane SR 96 that connects Columbus with Warner Robins, would provide an expressway far north, south, east and west of Atlanta to serve as an alternative to traveling through the region.

Depending on traffic volumes, Georgia could upgrade the expressways to freeways or interstate highways. Other states, including Illinois, North Carolina and Pennsylvania, have upgraded their four-lane expressways to improve goods movement throughout the state.

Adopt transit solutions that are flexible and adaptable

Instead of arguing for costly taxpayer-funded expansion of antiquated modes such as heavy rail, light rail and streetcars, Georgia policymakers should prepare for the future. Metro Atlanta and Georgia as a whole do not have the population density and spatial structure to make fixed rail work. When expensive options such as heavy rail run into financial woes, it has been shown that bus service in low-income neighborhoods becomes the low-hanging fruit sacrificed as transit agencies consider budget cuts.⁷ Policymakers must consider adding affordable options such as buses, bus rapid transit, express bus, shuttles, taxis, first-mile/last-mile service and ride-share services. Top-down social engineering motivated by the latest fads from Washington leads to costly, ineffective options that do not meet the needs of residents. Two examples are the poorly used Atlanta Streetcar⁸ (which the city plans to expand) and the much-studied Lovejoy-to-Atlanta commuter rail service proposal.⁹

Develop first- and last-mile solutions for transit

Not every transit user lives or works close to a transit stop; in Georgia, where most of the residential density is low, this is particularly true. A bus stop's service area is typically defined as a quarter-mile radius around a stop, roughly equivalent to a five-minute walk. For rapid transit, the distance from a stop

⁶ <http://www.dot.ga.gov/BuildSmart/programs/documents/GRIP/Facts/US27FactSheet.pdf>

⁷ <http://cityobservatory.org/urban-residents-arent-abandoning-buses-buses-are-abandoning-them/>

⁸ <http://www.georgiapolicy.org/2014/01/transit-relic-wont-help-transportation/>

⁹ <http://www.georgiapolicy.org/2005/12/road-to-congestion-relief-paved-with-common-sense/>

increases: up to a mile. The lack of a solution for this “last mile” between the stop and the destination is often a deterrent for people who would like transit as a viable choice. Park-and-ride lots at transit stations in the suburbs are crucial, for example, in metro Atlanta. “Kiss-and-ride” drop-off points and corporate and college shuttles to and from stations are among the first-mile and last-mile solutions. At the bus station outside Cumberland Mall in Cobb County, CobbLinc (formerly Cobb Community Transit) added taxi parking. MARTA partners with the ride-sharing service Uber for similar opportunities.¹⁰ Facilitating Zipcar-type hourly rentals (car-sharing) and bicycle and scooter rentals can be another option.

Plan for a future of transportation innovations

As technology evolves, so do transportation choices. As the introduction noted, driving remains by far the most popular commute mode in metro Atlanta. More than twice as many people work from home as take transit. Millennials and senior citizens who forgo personal vehicles are likely to eschew bus and rail in favor of taxis and ride-sharing, door-to-door services such as Uber and Lyft, and auto rentals by the hour. Instead of handicapping such options with taxes, fees and regulations to protect politically favored monopolies, legislators and policymakers should loosen the reins and examine how to facilitate consumers’ private-sector choices.

Society of Automated Engineers (SAE) level 4 autonomous cars (highly automated, with drivers having the option to control the car) will be ubiquitous in a decade.¹¹ Policymakers must study how to adapt Georgia’s roads to such commuter technology. Consider how quickly travelers have moved from static, in-car GPS and state-run 511 systems to smartphone-based, real-time and crowd-sourcing apps including Waze, Google Maps, gas price locators, weather apps, and combined-commute apps such as Roadify and OneBusAway, used by Cobb, Gwinnett and MARTA transit authorities.

Include Georgia’s research universities in solutions

Georgia has worked to create a friendly climate for automated vehicle testing. The state has the least restrictive rules for automated vehicle and connected vehicle testing and development in the country. Unfortunately, Georgia lags in automated vehicle development. Much of the testing is occurring in Arizona, California, Nevada and Texas. Autonomous vehicles, according to insurers, have the potential to reduce rear-end collisions up to 40%. With “connected” vehicle technology, they can also improve road capacity (allowing closer travel with fewer human-induced collisions) although such technology is at least 20-30 years away. Safety improvements are important: After declining for almost 50 consecutive years, traffic fatalities have increased in Georgia, largely due to driver distraction.

The next step is to adapt the technology to Georgia – or Georgia to the technology – by cultivating a climate friendly to innovation. Georgia’s research universities should examine the state’s road network to recommend mobility applications, including parking, infrastructure standardization, regulatory requirements and locations for demonstration lanes¹² and pilot projects, as well as considering the innovative mobility possibilities on the state’s imminent toll network.

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¹⁰ <https://newsroom.uber.com/us-georgia/uber-marta-connecting-the-last-mile/>

¹¹ The US National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) defines [six levels of car autonomy](https://www.nhtsa.gov/autonomy).

¹² <http://www.georgiapolicy.org/2016/04/transits-future-innovation-not-trains/>