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Traffic can cause delays, frustration, but can be sign of thriving areas

By Ryan Marshall rmarshall@newspost.com

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Traffic builds as it nears the Frederick exits of U.S. 15 Friday evening.

Staff photo by Graham Cullen

At a November meeting with Maryland Transportation Secretary Pete Rahn at Frederick's Winchester Hall, state, county, and local officials told the secretary about the problems that traffic congestion on U.S. 15 causes for the city and for Frederick County, and urged the state to find a way to speed up construction of improvements on the road to help ease the problem.

"We really need to get that project moving forward as quickly as possible," County Executive Jan Gardner told Rahn.

Frederick Mayor Michael O'Connor told Rahn and other state transportation officials at the meeting that backups on U.S. 15 push traffic onto side streets and into neighborhoods that aren't designed to handle it.

The section of highway between Interstate 70 and Md. 26 also plays an important role in the economic prosperity of the city, he said.

"This stretch of [U.S.] 15 is critically important because it is the lifeline for the city," O'Connor said.

As Frederick County continues to grow and add residents and businesses, managing traffic on the county's busiest roads will become increasingly important.

While there are a lot of rural roads around the county that can be congested for short periods of time or at certain times of the day, most local roads have manageable levels of congestion, Ron Burns, transportation engineer manager in the county's Department of Development Review, said Friday.

Many of the problem areas from the last five to ten years have been fixed, and the main problems today are on the county's highways: U.S. 15, I-270, and I-70, he said.

The section of U.S. 15 running through Frederick fails traffic capacity standards in both directions in both the morning and evening peak times, he said.

"We're squeezing out every ounce of capacity from that road," Burns said.

Business leaders say they hear from companies about the toll that traffic in the county can take.

"We hear it all the time," Frederick County Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Rick Weldon said in an email. "Every single member, from the smallest sole proprietors to our largest business members, have consistently made regional transportation issues one of their top concerns."

Businesses' responses can be relative, said Helen Propheter, director of the Frederick County Office of Economic Development.

Businesses that come to the county from more urban areas don't really see an issue with the traffic, but the ones coming from rural areas do talk about the congestion on Interstates 70 and 270, she said in an email.

Companies that move to the county sell the idea of a reverse commute to their employees who may live in Montgomery or Howard counties, Propher said.

Even if employees still have to travel 40 minutes to get to work, at least they're moving on the highway instead of sitting in traffic, she said.

Despite the headaches it can cause for businesses, commuters, and residents, traffic is something of a necessary evil for any thriving community, according to experts in transportation and development.

A certain amount of traffic and congestion are signs of a healthy urban area, said Jeff Lindley, Chief Technical Officer of the Institute of Transportation Engineers.

Having no congestion likely means that an area has either overbuilt costly infrastructure, or a major factory or employer has left, he said. But there does come a point when congestion becomes so bad that people and companies start to leave, Lindley said.

"Companies don't want to locate in places where their workers can't get to work," Lindley said.

Reducing congestion through development

Traffic congestion in urban areas can be reduced by putting jobs and housing closer together, to reduce the amount of time that people have to drive.

"Good mixed use will help the demand side of the traffic equation," Burns said.

Christopher Leinberger, chairman of the Center for Real Estate and Urban Analysis at George Washington University, said that part of reducing congestion is creating walkable urban areas with a blend of residential, commercial and other uses in an area with multiple transit options.

He pointed to the recent announcement by Amazon that it will move part of its second headquarters operation to Virginia's Crystal City, as well as Marriott's decision to move their headquarters from a Montgomery County office park to downtown Bethesda, as signs of the future of business growth in the region.

"If you want to have job growth, you'd better have walkable urban places," Leinberger said. "That's the economic future of the country. If you can't deliver that, you're just not competitive."

The level of congestion depends on what type of community is being looked at, he said.

In walkable urban areas such as downtown Frederick, "you welcome congestion," because of the options and opportunities it provides, he said.

More people mean more restaurants, apartments, and the opportunity for people-watching.

"Great walkable urban areas want to be congested. That's a sign of civilization," Leinberger said.

The Washington, D.C. metro area has had 64 walkable urban areas identified, including downtown Frederick, and most are located in the suburbs, Leinberger said.

It can be harder for outlying areas such as Frederick to create density, but it's not impossible, he said, pointing to areas such as Reston Town Center, the Pike and Rose community near Rockville, and the Mosaic neighborhood in Fairfax County as positive examples.

Frederick has done well with its downtown, but the county could use a walkable urban community in the suburbs to provide an option for people who don't necessarily want to live in a historic downtown, Leinberger said.

A regional approach

While some congestion is a sign of vitality, what drives people crazy is when traffic backups are unpredictable, Lindley said.

If congestion is predictable, in certain areas or at certain times, people have a much better time coping with it, he said.

On Nov. 26, the Greater Washington Partnership released its "Capital Region Blueprint for Regional Mobility," a study of what's needed to ease transportation issues in the wide-spread capital region stretching between Baltimore and Richmond, Va.

The region's current transportation limits its potential for economic growth and its ability to compete with other urban areas, the study found.

With current projections and planned investments, traffic congestion in the region is expected to increase by 150 percent across the region, and by 125 percent per capita between 2015 and 2040, according to the report.

There's no silver bullet for easing congestion, said Joe McAndrew, director of transportation policy for the Partnership.

The Partnership supports increasing the number of toll lanes in the region if it's done correctly, with a clear understanding of what the benefits and costs would be, McAndrew said.

Overall, the region needs a coordinated approach that provides various ways for people to get around, he said.

Lindley said that while planners and local governments can manage and lessen the impacts of congestion, eliminating it is unlikely.

Governments can add lanes, eliminate choke points, and improve traffic signal timing to improve traffic flow, he said. They can shape development policy to build mixed-use development and walkable communities with connections to transit.

But traffic congestion is probably here to stay.

"'Solve' is probably chasing something that isn't possible," Lindley said.

Follow Ryan Marshall on Twitter:

@RMarshallFNP.

Ryan Marshall

Ryan Marshall is the transportation and growth and development reporter for the News-Post. He can be reached at rmarshall@newspost.com.