

TRAFFIC CONGESTION Mode Matters

We often think that congestion is a function of how many people are moving along a given stretch of road at a given time. While the number of people on the road does matter, it often provides little information unless we know what mode of transportation they are using. Look at the pictures below:





These pictures, taken by Phil Sheffield for an article in The Tampa Tribune by Jim Beamguard on July 18, 1999, show the same 40 people on a Tampa street. Picture #1 shows them in cars parked nose-to-nose. Picture #2 shows the same people without the cars, and chairs placed where the drivers were sitting in the photo #1. Photo number three shows the same 40 people

arranged as if they were sitting on a transit bus. Photo #4 shows these people, 10 as cyclists and 30 as pedestrians.

Clearly, different modes of transportation consume different amounts of space per person. In photo number one, the cars are nose-to-nose. When cars are moving, they require an additional car length between each car for every 10 miles per hour of speed to ensure safe stopping. So single-occupant vehicles consume an enormous amount of space and create congested conditions even when relatively few people are traveling.

Cars are often a convenient and efficient way to travel. Yet in some circumstances, walking, cycling or transit can be much more efficient. (A large proportion of trips in metropolitan areas are less than three miles – a reasonable distance for cycling.) However, when government policies make it cheaper to drive and park than to take transit, or when sidewalks and bike lanes are missing, it should be no surprise that most people will chose to drive and park.

Careful attention to transit pricing, roadway pricing, parking pricing and the provision of bicycle and pedestrian facilities can help people make better choices about when to drive and when to walk, bike or use transit. The end result can be a better experience for drivers, transit users, cyclists and pedestrians alike.

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