



Hurry up and wait

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North Jersey commuters spend 49 hours each year waiting in traffic. And waiting. And waiting.

That's the equivalent of an entire weekend - just looking at the license plate and brake lights of the car ahead.

The idle time on the highway translates to \$824 in excess fuel costs and lost productivity each year, according to a study released Monday by the Texas Transportation Institute.

It all adds up to make North Jersey and Manhattan the second-most congested area in the country, followed by Chicago, San Francisco and Dallas. Los Angeles ranks No. 1.

The figures weren't a surprise to drivers.

"That sounds low," said Matt Siegel, a Ringwood resident who clocks 60,000 miles per year as a traveling pharmaceutical salesman and figures he spends more than two days a year sitting in traffic.

Siegel said he avoids Routes 4 and 17 "at all costs" during rush hour. He even arranges his day around the traffic snags. And watches the weather.

"You don't want it to rain because that slows traffic," Siegel said. "But you want it to be overcast so you don't have the sun glare."

School vacations help, too. "I can't wait for summer," he said.

Nationally, traffic delays cost \$64.8 billion annually, taking into account today's high fuel prices. The study said 2.3 billion gallons of fuel were wasted in 2003. The average North Jersey driver wastes 24 gallons of fuel each year, second only to the Los Angeles driver, who burns 61 gallons yearly.

The problem is that transportation improvements aren't keeping up with even slow growth in travel demand, the study says.

The Texas Transportation Institute, at Texas A&M University, used figures from 1982 to 2003 for its most recent report on urban area traffic. The New York-Newark area has consistently ranked second for delays and the cost of congestion.

The tri-state area is plagued by clogged roadways and a mass-transit system rife with gaps.

Commuters scramble to the island of Manhattan, creating bottlenecks at Hudson River crossings. And New Jersey office development in the past 25 years has been concentrated near major highways, causing congestion to spill onto local roads.

"Roads are overtaxed ... by land use decisions and investments that have been made," said Martin Robins, director of the Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center at Rutgers University.

Robins worries that traffic congestion could intensify with the impending collapse of the state Transportation

Trust Fund, which pays to fix potholes and bridges with funds from the gasoline tax and matching dollars from the federal government.

The fund will have just enough money to pay its debts next year, without an increase in the gasoline tax or a new source of cash. If it implodes, "it will cause us to defer a lot of projects that could be pursued," Robins said.

On the federal level, the Bush administration has proposed spending \$284 billion on road and transit projects - pledging to veto anything in excess of that amount.

But Senate leaders on Monday said they will tack \$11 billion onto the bill, bringing the spending package up to \$295 billion.

Last year, the Senate approved a \$318 billion bill to counter a \$256 billion package pushed by the White House.

The last federal highway bill expired in 2003.

"It directs every available resource to highway, transit and safety programs without raising the gas tax or increasing the deficit, said Federal Highway Administrator Mary E. Peters, in a written statement released in response to the report. "The president's plan also gives states a menu of innovative options to tackle gridlock."

New Jersey is unlikely to see much more than the \$1.5 billion in federal funding it received this year, state officials have said.

Even if it does, the state's dense population causes problems that extra highway lanes won't solve.

"We can't pave our way out of our problem," said Marc LaVorgna, spokesman for the state Department of Transportation. "New Jersey is pretty thoroughly developed transportation-wise."

The key, he said, is considering land use and transportation together. "You can't build a mini-mall ... and expect transportation to catch up," LaVorgna said. "It's about having an entire network that functions together."

One component of smart planning is mass transit, something that isn't utilized as well as it could be, said Damien Newton, New Jersey coordinator for the Tri-State Transportation Campaign, a group that works to reverse automobile dependency.

"If there was affordable, on-time transit," he said, "people would be able to use those hours more productively."

Newton says the state needs to invest more into transit options. "They have to look at buses."

As people move farther from their jobs to find more affordable housing, delays will become greater.

Steve Carrellas, president of the New Jersey branch of the National Motorists Association, says its time for businesses to look into "teleworking" or flexible hours for their employees.

"If I'm not making the commute, I'm not going to get delayed in traffic," he said.