



Center for the
American Dream
of mobility and home ownership

Issue Backgrounder

Congestion and the American Dream

Denver is the nation's third-most congested urban area, and congestion costs Denver residents nearly \$1.5 billion a year. Spending 60 percent of the region's transportation budget on 1 percent of the region's travelers will not solve this problem. The Center for the American Dream will find low-cost solutions that can solve congestion without raising taxes.

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The automobile has given Americans incredible mobility which translates into better-paying jobs, lower-cost consumer goods, rapid-response emergency care, and fantastic recreation opportunities. This mobility is truly part of the American dream.

But in urban areas such as Denver, auto congestion can also be a nightmare. A recent study found that Denver, the nation's twenty-fourth largest urban area, is the nation's third most congested area and that it has the fourth fastest-growing congestion. Congestion forces Denver drivers to waste more than 100 million gallons of fuel each year, adds to air pollution, and costs Denverites nearly \$1.5 billion a year.

RTD, Denver's transit agency, says it has a plan to reduce congestion by spending billions of dollars on light-rail and commuter-rail transit. RTD's plans would devote 60 percent of the region's transportation funds to transit, yet RTD admits that rail transit will not carry more than about 1 percent of all travel.

The problem with rail transit is that it is a nineteenth-century technology that doesn't work in twenty-first century cities. Rail transit is slow—light rail averages just 20 miles per hour—and it usually goes from where you are not to where you don't want to be. Even at the height of America's streetcar network in 1920, the average American traveled less than 600 miles a year by transit.

Today, the average American travels 14,000 miles a year by auto, which can provide speedy, door-to-door service at a low cost. Americans spend an average of 18 cents a passenger mile on driving, about the same that they spend on transit fares. While roads and streets are subsidized, the average subsidy is less than a half cent per passenger mile. By comparison, transit subsidies are more than 50 cents a passenger mile, and rail transit is even more expensive.

Congestion is a particularly serious problem for low-income people, who often live in the most congested areas. Access to jobs is critical for these people. A University of California study found that nearly half the job disparity between black and white workers was due to mobility problems. Relieving congestion can help low-income families get out of poverty and save everyone money.

Fortunately, there are many low-cost solutions to highway congestion, some of which were identified in the report that found that Denver is the nation's third-most congested region (see <http://mobility.tamu.edu>). These include:

- Traffic signal synchronization, which has been implemented in less than half of Denver's traffic signals;
- Freeway ramp metering, which saves travelers time by smoothing freeway flows;
- Incident management, which uses video cameras and patrols to rapidly locate and remove stalled and crashed vehicles.

Other low-cost solutions include:

- High-occupancy/toll (HOT) lanes that would allow low-occupancy vehicles to use carpool lanes by paying an electronic toll. This would make better use of those lanes and give people an option of getting home quicker by paying a toll;
- Reversible lanes that allow a six-lane highway can be four lanes inbound in the morning and four lanes outbound in the afternoon;
- Bus rapid transit can provide transit riders with better service at a far lower cost than rails.

The Independence Institute's Center for the American Dream will help Colorado transportation advocates identify and promote these and other low-cost solutions to Denver's congestion woes.