

# TRANSIT for Livable Communities



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**Re: New Report by CEO's for Cities Finds Big Problems with Old Ways of Measuring Traffic Congestion. Commuting in the Twin Cities may be worse than we think – but not because of congestion.**

A new report by CEO's for Cities: "*Driven Apart: How Sprawl Is Lengthening Our Commutes and Why Misleading Mobility Measures Are Making Things Worse*" raises questions about a report long thought to be the gold standard in measuring highway congestion and performance.

Congestion rankings from the annual Urban Mobility Report from Texas A& M University are typically front page news across the nation and the Twin Cities. The report's "Travel Time Index" and its estimates of the costs of congestion delay and wasted fuel were widely quoted in county board rooms, at state legislatures, and in the media.<sup>1</sup>

CEO's for Cities new report calls into question the Urban Mobility Report's methodologies and findings. *Driven Apart* contends that the Urban Mobility Report overstates congestion levels by as much as 70 percent and that its comparison of congestion levels among regions is highly flawed. It finds that regions with shorter commute distances – not regions with less highway congestion – are really the top performers.

Transit for Livable Communities (TLC) welcomes CEO's for Cities comprehensive review of the methods and findings of the Urban Mobility Report. Over the past decade, the Surface Transportation Policy Partnership, a number of prominent transportation professionals and TLC have questioned the Mobility Report's conclusions. Over the last decade, TLC regularly prepared its own companion Policy Brief when the Mobility Report was released.<sup>2</sup> For years, many readers of the Mobility Report mistakenly believed that the Twin Cities region had among the nation's fastest growing traffic congestion.

Information in *Driven Apart* raises a different and more worrisome concern for Twin Cities' commuters. Using data from the Federal Highway Administration, *Driven Apart* finds that an average commuter in the Twin Cities region drives 1,000 miles more each year than an average commuter in places like Chicago, Portland, and

Sacramento, where commute distances are shorter. These are regions with robust public transit and/or greater population and job density.

These extra miles driven by Twin Cities' commuters – about a billion additional miles each year when taken in aggregate – wastes time, fuel, and money; and adds a lot of harmful emissions to the air.

Over the past decade, findings in the Urban Mobility Report may have contributed to the heavy focus on highway expansion. Investment in new highway capacity in the Twin Cities region totaled over \$100 million annually from 2000 through 2010 and peaked at \$250 million in 2006 alone.<sup>3</sup> Today the Twin Cities region has one of the largest regional highway systems (and one of the smallest regional rail systems) of major metro regions. During that same decade, new jobs and housing followed these new and wider highways and bridges out into farm fields and open space.<sup>4</sup>

*“Driven Apart”* calls for more robust measures of transportation performance – different than the Urban Mobility Report's almost singular focus on traffic congestion. Those measures could include accessibility by modes including transit, trip distance, measure of land use intensity, street network connectivity, etc. In a 2008 report entitled *Transportation Performance in the Twin Cities Region*<sup>5</sup>, TLC and its partners discussed a number of similar alternative performance measures.

The CEO's for Cities report *Driven Apart* should foster a long overdue debate about the way in which this nation and our region invests in transportation and how those investments shape our development patterns. TLC believes that our region's focus should be on 1) more compact land use, 2) maintaining our existing roads and bridges in a state of good repair, and 3) offering more transportation options—expanded and connected networks of bus, rail, bike routes, and sidewalks.

For the full CEO's for Cities report *Driven Apart: How Sprawl Is Lengthening Our Commutes and Why Misleading Mobility Measures Are Making Things Worse*,” go to: <http://www.ceosforcities.org/work/driven-apart>

By Barb Thoman, Executive Director

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<sup>1</sup> The release of the Mobility report in September 2004 was followed by this headline in the Star Tribune's metro section: “Lost Time in Traffic: 42 Hours per Year.” A May 2005 headline in the local section of the Pioneer Press following the 2005 Mobility report release was “Stop Go Lose.”

<sup>2</sup> TLC's policy brief on the Texas Transportation Institute's Urban Mobility Report (2008) can be found at [http://www.tlcmnnesota.org/pdf/TwinCitiesTrafficCongestion%20\(2009\).pdf](http://www.tlcmnnesota.org/pdf/TwinCitiesTrafficCongestion%20(2009).pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Transportation Improvement Program, September 21, 2004, page 48.

<sup>4</sup> Metropolitan Council Benchmarks. <http://www.metrocouncil.org/planning/framework/benchmarks.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Transportation Performance in the Twin Cities Region

<http://www.tlcmnnesota.org/pdf/Transportation%20Performance%20Report%202009%20FINAL.pdf>