

Chicago Tribune

Chicago No. 1 in road congestion

New study says commuters here waste an average of 70 hours on the road annually

By Jon Hilkevitch, TRIBUNE REPORTER 12:11 AM CST, January 20, 2011

In a confirmation that the worsening traffic aches and pains drivers here feel are real, the Chicago region has shot up to No. 1 in road congestion in the U.S., according to a long-running study of mobility problems choking the nation.

The increasing gridlock on major roadways at almost any hour, any day of the week was measured in 2009, when drivers in many other metropolitan areas caught a slight breather from growing congestion, said the Urban Mobility Report, issued Thursday by the Texas Transportation Institute.

Beyond the time it normally would take for an automobile trip in relatively free-flowing traffic, commuters in the Chicago area, including northwest Indiana, spent an additional 70 hours behind the wheel in 2009, the study said.

The Chicago area shared the top spot for worst congestion with the Washington metro region in regard to what the slow trips mean to individual drivers, the study's rankings showed.

The national average was 34 hours, the study found.

In earlier studies the Chicago region ranked No. 2 or No. 3 in most measurements of congestion and delay.

The 70 hours of delay here in 2009 was up from 64 hours of extra driving in 2008 in the Chicago area, 55 hours of wasted time in 1999 and 18 hours in 1982, the report noted.

"In terms of the delay for each auto commuter, Chicago now tips the scales at No. 1, where in the past Los Angeles was locked in that spot," said David Schrank, an associate research scientist at the institute and a co-author of the report.

The study also measured the impact of traffic congestion on personal finances.

Again, the Chicago area took sole possession of No. 1 in the cost of congestion to each individual commuter — \$1,738 on average for each person for all of 2009.

Congestion cost the nation \$115 billion in 2009 and caused commuters to travel 4.8 billion hours more and buy an extra 3.9 billion gallons of fuel, the report said.

The data collected from 439 urban areas showed that without mass transit, commuters would have spent an additional 785 million hours on the roads and burned 640 million more gallons of fuel.

"There is no doubt that expanding public transportation use is key to reducing traffic congestion," said William Millar, president of the American Public Transportation Association.

A weak national economy and high gas prices in 2008 and 2009 led to fewer vehicles on the roads and a corresponding decline in congestion in many other metropolitan areas beside Chicago area, officials said.

Experts said that situation is already starting to change as the economy strengthens and more people are working and commuting.

"Our national message is that if you are a commuter, enjoy what is out there now because it is probably going to get worse again," Schrank said.

The Chicago region didn't catch a break from congestion mainly because of its location in the middle of the country, the huge amount of local and cross-country trucking and voluminous freight rail shipments that are off-loaded onto trucks that clog local highways and arterial streets, officials said.

The report also highlighted the effect of worsening congestion on the environment.

Chronic stop-and-go traffic caused Chicago-area drivers to burn at least several extra tanks of gas — 52 more gallons for each commuter in 2009, the study said. It resulted in a No. 2 ranking behind Washington and surrounding suburbs.

For the first time in 27 years of tracking congestion patterns, the study measured congestion's impact on the trucking industry.

The Chicago region again ranked No. 1 in the extra travel time it took trucks to complete trips because of heavy traffic, the study said.

The trucking delays in 2009 totaled 31.7 million hours, costing businesses in the Chicago region \$3.3 billion, the study said.

Officials representing the road construction industry said the mobility report's findings should spur Congress and the Obama administration to pass new transportation legislation to pay for major projects to ease congestion.

The only possible bright spot for traffic-weary Chicago-area drivers is that congestion has been so bad for so long, people have become acclimated to it.

"Generally, we are seeing more congestion 24/7," Schrank said. "It's hard to say if year-to-year motorists notice a difference."

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