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## Editorial: Traffic congestion costs motorists time and money, and requires smart solutions



Interstate 64 eastbound traffic backs up after a morning multi-vehicle crash closed the Hampton Roads Bridge-Tunnel in 2019. (Staff/Daily Press)



By [THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT AND DAILY PRESS EDITORIAL BOARD](#) | October 23, 2023

Anybody who drives in Hampton Roads knows the frustration of being stuck in traffic that's slowly crawling along — if it's moving at all. "Rush" hours are anything but, and it doesn't take much — a minor accident, a breakdown, thoughtless drivers — to cause a jam any time of day. The system of expressways, bridges and tunnels that is supposed to keep vehicles moving often looks more like a disorderly parking lot.

Highway improvement and expansion projects can help — to some extent. We also need more creative solutions beyond endless road construction.

The Road Information Project (TRIP), a nonprofit transportation research organization in Washington, recently issued a report offering facts and figures about how bad traffic problems are in Hampton Roads and Virginia.

TRIP estimates that because of congestion, the average commuter in Hampton Roads spends an extra 41 hours a year on the roads. While stuck in traffic, the commuter's vehicle burns about 14 extra gallons of fuel over the year. The lost time and wasted fuel cost Hampton Roads commuters about \$850 a year.

When cars and trucks here can actually move, they are likely bumping over roads with potholes, ruts and rough surfaces. The TRIP study reports that only about a quarter of the major roadways in Hampton Roads are in good condition. The region has the highest percentage (28%) of roads found to be in poor shape, and also high percentages of roads in mediocre or fair condition.

Those road conditions, the report says, mean that a Hampton Roads commuter shells out about \$714 extra a year on repairs, wear on tires, increased fuel use and faster vehicle depreciation.

This is hardly news. Traffic jams have long been an unpleasant fact of life in Hampton Roads. Typically, when a bridge or tunnel or intersection becomes an especially bad choke point, the Virginia Department of Transportation responds with an expansion project, maybe including some redesign. It begins to seem as though some stretches of highway are permanent construction zones.

The most notable project underway is the Hampton Roads Bridge-Tunnel expansion, expected to cost more than \$3.9 billion. The work will widen the four-lane segments along nearly 10 miles of the Interstate 64 corridor and add new twin tunnels across the harbor. It's one of the largest infrastructure projects in the United States and the most massive highway construction project in the history of the commonwealth.

When complete, the expansion is expected to ease congestion, making traffic move more quickly and reliably.

But for how long? What about when more people start using the bridge-tunnel, and economic development means even more commuters? What do we do when the traffic becomes a problem again? How many times can we expand the bridge-tunnel, or add more lanes to any problematic stretch of road, or build new highways and keep all the ones we have in good repair?

Rather than relying too heavily on more and more construction, we also need to get serious about reducing the numbers of cars on our roads.

Ironically, the Virginia Economic Development Partnership cites as a regional benefit the fact that 41% of Hampton Roads residents don't work and live in the same city, saying it gives the region "a cohesive culture and community." In reality, heavy dependence on private vehicles to commute elsewhere to work is a major source of our traffic woes.

Expansion and promotion of affordable regional mass-transit options could help. So could promoting high-occupancy-vehicle lanes and ride-share programs.

Fewer cars on our roads would have the added benefit of reducing emissions that contribute to air pollution and climate change. Not constantly building more and bigger highways would also be good for flood resilience. Paving reduces the amount of rainfall that can be absorbed by the ground and increases the runoff that can cause flash floods.

Transportation is vital to the region's economic vitality and quality of life. Up-to-date highways are undeniably important, but we should not rely too heavily on private vehicles and endless road construction.