



Steering clear of freeways for a week

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It's as lowbrow in some circles as smoking or speaking in tongues or letting your kids eat fries, but I will not lie: I live in a suburb.

We like it there. We have trees and good neighbors and hiking trails. We're close to the airport.

But on an ordinary day, my drive to work takes about 35 minutes — and "ordinary" means the increasingly felicitous circumstance of there being no wrecks, breakdowns, construction work, traffic enforcement or alien spacecraft landings on Stemmons Freeway.

Nearly 20 miles of my 24-mile commute are on a single stretch of Interstate 35E. Which makes me as much a freeway-dependent, auto-centric carbon-Bigfoot as most Texans.

Perhaps it's our state's seemingly inexhaustible distances, but it has been pointed out to me that Texas is a place where people don't think twice about driving from Dallas to Houston to pick up a pair of shoes.

Not everybody, of course. As soon as DART's northernmost rail line reached our area, my husband happily gave up the drive and became a daily train rider.

I still fight the freeway traffic.

There's a growing chorus that this is a flawed and unsustainable model for population distribution. Freeways, this argument not unreasonably states, have given us sprawl and air pollution. They have enabled parasitical suburbs to suck the vitality from our urban centers.

Locally, the debate has fixed on the proposed Trinity toll road, envisioned as a riverside traffic reliever for overloaded downtown expressways.

Some opponents support the argument that the only way to curb sprawl and reinvigorate cities is not only to stop building new freeways but to tear out old ones. They point to successful highway-removal experiments in San Francisco, New York, Milwaukee and elsewhere.

"We should be correcting one of the great errors in the history of American city planning: the postwar binge of urban freeway building," writes Berkeley, Calif.-based urban theorist Charles Siegel, who believes new freeways only perpetuate an insatiable demand for more.

"Instead of reducing congestion, the freeways encouraged people to move to remote suburbs and drive long distances to work and to shopping, increasing traffic dramatically."

I'm not planning to move — I'm really awfully attached to our house, and besides, that stale social criticism of suburban communities as "sterile" and "conformist" is supercilious nonsense.

The most conformist people I know are the ones who think they have the only acceptable formula for where to live, what to eat, how to raise children, what to do with their free time and how to vote.

But would I live where I do if not for the (sometimes) unobstructed, high-speed convenience of freeways? Maybe not.

In truth, I have taken freeway convenience for granted most of my adult life, save for a few thrifty years when I got around Austin — it was a smaller place then — on a moped.

I have commuted between Springfield, Va., and Washington, Dallas and Bedford, Arlington and Fort Worth, Fort Worth and Dallas. Now, on most days, I make a round trip between suburban Flower Mound and downtown Dallas.

So I am planning an experiment. As of Thursday afternoon, after I have written and filed this column, I am on a strict, one-week highway ban.

I'm not on vacation. It's an ordinary week. I have to go to work, run errands, see people, shop, give a speech.

I'll have to move between Dallas, Tarrant and Denton counties — at a minimum — without using any limited-access, high-speed-limit freeways (frontage roads are allowed when absolutely necessary, since they have intersections and traffic lights). I'll drive exclusively on surface streets, take the train or carpool.

It may not sound like much of a hardship. Years ago, we had a piano tuner who worked all over the area and never drove on the freeway, just because he hated it so much. Perhaps, like him, I'll readily adapt.

I don't really know what to expect, since it has been years since I spent a freeway-free week without being either on vacation or wretchedly sick.

There's no single easy route, so I'll try a few different ones, and maybe discover some new back roads. If nothing else, it'll be a nice break from the same old billboards and road signs I see every day.

Next week, I'll provide an update on how much time and effort the experiment required.

In the meantime, if you see me, it'll be on the slow road.