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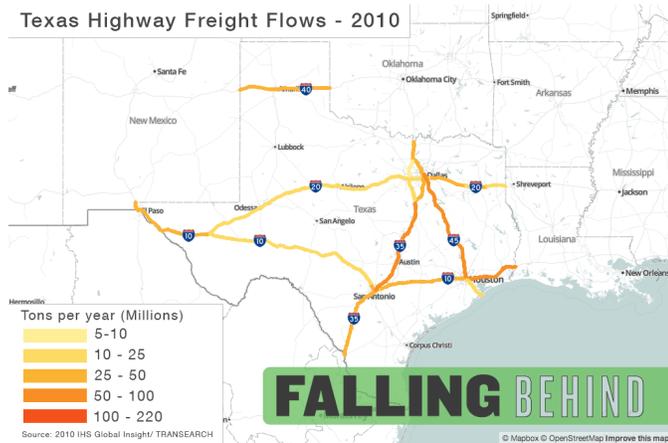


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Some Worry Traffic Issues Will Stem Texas' Growth

by [Aman Batheja](#) | July 9, 2014 | [34 Comments](#)



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graphic by: Jessica Hamel / Dan Hill



Falling Behind is a 10-part series on the flip side of state leaders' aggressive pursuit of the "Texas Miracle." You can also read our related Hurting For Work series [here](#), or subscribe to our water and education newsletters [here](#).

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Mayor Confident City Will Be

national leader in job growth since the recession, spurred by a low cost of living and a booming energy industry. Bob Harvey, president of the Greater Houston Partnership, an economic development group, regularly chats with local employers and those thinking about bringing new jobs to the city. Listening to complaints about Houston traffic comes with the territory.

But last summer, Harvey observed a shift. In conversations with business leaders, concerns about congestion began surfacing more frequently and with greater urgency.

“I can now pretty much count on it coming up in every conversation,” Harvey said late last year. “It’s just the furious amount of growth we’ve seen in the last couple of years that has overwhelmed that problem.”

Variations of Harvey’s experience can be found in other major Texas cities. As the state has outpaced the other 49 in economic growth over the last decade, Texas has seen a surge in its population that’s [expected to continue for years to come](#).

But the prospect of 20 million more Texans by 2050 has both urban planners and business leaders worried that not enough is being done to prepare for the state’s more crowded future and the potential drag on the economy that might come with such grinding traffic.

“Population is going to double. Transportation doesn’t come anywhere close to doubling,” said Tim Lomax, a research engineer with the Texas A&M Transportation Institute. “Is the congestion in the Texas cities going to get so much worse that instead of Texas being a place that attracts jobs, it becomes a place that repels jobs?”

Compounding this challenge is the anticipated increase in trucks transporting goods on Texas highways. In 2010, 1.6 billion tons of freight moved through or within Texas via roads, rail, pipelines, ports and air, according to the research firm IHS/Global Insight Transearch. Truck transport made up the largest share, at 62 percent. By 2040, total freight tonnage moving through Texas is projected to double to over 3.3 billion tons — and the portion moved via trucks is expected to grow to 66 percent.

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In 1999, computer manufacturer Dell made headlines when it acknowledged that Central Texas traffic had contributed to its decision to expand in Tennessee rather than at its Round Rock headquarters north of Austin. Concerns that the company's decision would be followed by a wave of copycats never materialized, but regional traffic problems remain a serious concern, said Jeremy Martin with the Austin Chamber of Commerce.

"It has impacted expansion opportunities," Martin said, though he declined to give specifics. "Companies want to be close to where their employees live and want to make sure there's adequate transportation and real estate available."



Ben Philpott for KUT News.

As in other fast-growing states, transportation funding in Texas is widely viewed as inadequate. Voters will weigh in on a partial solution in November when they are asked to approve a constitutional amendment diverting some tax revenue from the ongoing oil boom to the state highway fund. While the plan would raise an estimated \$1.4 billion annually for the Texas Department of Transportation, it would still leave the agency billions of dollars short of what officials have said is needed to maintain traffic at current levels.

To stretch their limited funds further, Texas cities have [embraced toll projects](#) to expand local highway networks. Several cities are also working to expand public transportation.

Dallas is among those employing both strategies, developing several toll projects as well as working to expand its light-rail system. At 85 miles, Dallas' light rail network is already the largest in the country, yet most city residents still rely on cars to get around.

“By and large the transit ridership remains a pretty small percentage, and clearly that’s based on the fact that it’s not such a convenient option yet,” said Peer Frank Chacko, assistant director for sustainable development and construction for Dallas.

Changing that dynamic will take years, Chacko said, and will involve combating sprawl, which has played a role in stimulating both economic growth and congestion. As businesses have taken advantage of the state’s large supply of cheap, undeveloped land, the new jobs and economic activity have encouraged the expansion of suburban communities farther away from the city’s urban centers.

“Each municipality is competing for economic development and trying to attract more jobs,” Chacko said. “Most of the transportation decisions, the vast majority of them, don’t do much to reduce sprawl, and essentially fuel sprawl.”

A closer look at the ripple effects from congestion suggests that the means of addressing it are more complicated than building more highways or expanding public transit.

Last year, researchers at the Texas A&M Transportation Institute looked at what travel patterns could look like in 2035, specifically [the route between Round Rock and Austin via Interstate 35](#). During rush hour, a 20-mile drive between the two cities can regularly take 45 minutes to an hour. Portions of the route include three of the state’s 100 most congested corridors, including the worst, the segment of I-35 through downtown Austin.

The researchers developed a model that assumed that the Central Texas population would grow as currently projected and that dozens of proposed transportation projects would be completed, including widening some local roads and expanding regional public transit. Even still, the rush-hour drive between Austin and Round Rock grew from 45 minutes today to well over two hours in 2035, according to Lomax.

“The congestion in our model lasted until 10 in the evening,” Lomax said. “So if the sun’s up, I-35 is screwed up.”

Such a forecast might sound bleak, but it’s also never going to happen, said Lomax. He explained that his model used population projections that do not consider how congestion might affect where people live and work. If travel times get

significantly worse on popular corridors, he said, many people would make different life decisions.

“People who live in Round Rock will either move to jobs closer to Round Rock or move to downtown Austin,” Lomax said.

Such a domino effect could upend population projections around the state. The end result could be that urban centers such as Dallas-Fort Worth, Houston and Austin never grow nearly as large as they are expected to under current projections.

“So the real downside to not addressing that congestion is some of that congestion goes to Tucson, Salt Lake City, Charlotte, Nashville, Memphis,” Lomax said.

If Texas cities notice that congestion is stalling economic growth, that could prompt local leaders to tackle the underlying issues spurring migration to the suburbs, such as the supply of affordable housing and the quality of inner-city schools.

“If we do a better job with public schools, we could probably convince people to live closer to their jobs,” Lomax said.

Of course, there are worse problems than the heavy traffic burden created by a region’s popularity. As cities like Detroit have seen, one surefire way to alleviate congestion is a severe economic downturn.

“The fact that this issue is looming as large as it is, as suddenly as it is, is a function of how well the economy is doing,” Harvey said. “These are high-class problems, but they are still problems, and you need to address them or they ultimately will limit growth.”

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