

In a jam

HERE IS HOW THE AVERAGE Maryland commuter spends his travel time: sitting alone in a car stuck in traffic. In an economy where time is money and gasoline is approaching \$3 a gallon, all that inconvenience comes at a cost — about \$3 billion per year.

At least that's the finding of a new report by the Texas Transportation Institute for some leading Maryland business groups. The authors looked at a variety of economic factors, from wasted fuel to the more nebulous "lost economic opportunity" that results from all that unproductive time. They make a convincing case that in a prosperous state such as Maryland, doing nothing about traffic congestion is akin to running over the goose that lays the golden egg.

The study's sponsors, the **Greater Baltimore Committee**, the Maryland Chamber of Commerce and the Greater Washington Board of Trade, want Gov. Martin O'Malley and the General Assembly to spend \$600 million more each year on transportation. And looking at it from a purely economic point of view, it's hard to argue with their position.

Mr. O'Malley is asking for \$400 million in

new transit and highway spending as part of the \$2 billion budget-balancing package he hopes the legislature will approve in the coming special session. It's easy to figure out why his request falls short of what business leaders want — tax fatigue. He's already proposing a variety of tax increases, and he knows the beating other governors have taken over transportation financing.

In a poll conducted last June for a coalition of advocacy groups that generally favor higher taxes, a proposed 12-cent gas tax increase (an amount suggested at one time by Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller) was the least favored of all the tax options.

But this is one instance when voters are plain wrong. Investing in transportation yields real returns. The Texas study found that spending \$600 million produces more than \$1 billion in economic benefits. Those include direct impact (construction jobs) and indirect impact (2.6 million fewer man-hours in traffic) each year.

There are other ways to raise money for transportation, of course, but the gas tax is probably the fairest. It also provides a disincentive to drive, a sensible policy if the state is to move from a post-World War II car-oriented economy into a 21st-century transit-centered one that fulfills the nation's energy and environmental goals.

