

Congestion Costs Region Billions Each Year

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ANNAPOLIS - Traffic congestion in the Baltimore and Washington areas costs Maryland citizens \$3.1 billion annually, according to a new study.

The Texas Transportation Institute report, commissioned by area business groups, said Tuesday that the cost of congestion in the state has increased by 1,200 percent since 1982 due to a rise in traffic volume without corresponding improvement or construction of roads.

Driving in "peak periods" costs Marylanders more than \$800 a year, the report said.

"More and more citizens are sitting in traffic, which is harming the economy and quality of life," said Johanna Neumann, spokeswoman for Maryland PIRG.

Congestion also takes its toll on businesses, said Kathy Snyder, president of the Maryland Chamber of Commerce. She said most businesses would take an increase in the gas tax if it meant less time and money spent sitting in traffic.

According to the report, almost 60 million hours a year are spent in traffic in Baltimore, wasting more than 40 million gallons of fuel. In the Washington metro area, drivers spend twice as many hours waiting and burn 90 million gallons of fuel.

Business groups like the chamber and the **Greater Baltimore Committee** have called for an additional \$600 million for the Transportation Trust Fund, but Gov. Martin O'Malley has pledged only \$392 million for the fund if his budget plan is approved.

The report said a \$600 million increase would provide 8,106 new jobs in total and a \$944 million increase in economic activity in the region.

"The big question is how much money within the Transportation Trust Fund is allocated to transit," Neumann said. "It's a flawed system if it's going to build new roads. If it's helping to fund new transit projects, then that's a whole other story."

That was echoed by Dru Schmidt-Perkins, executive director of the anti-sprawl group 1000 Friends of Maryland, who said people "recognize even after adding lanes to beltways and miles to highways, traffic is just getting worse."

She said the state should look to long-term congestion relief and not quick fixes.

A poll released Wednesday by 1000 Friends of Maryland showed just how frustrated citizens are with traffic. More respondents - 67 percent - rated traffic as a serious problem than public education or taxes, according to the random June telephone poll of 1,000 registered voters.

Seventy-four percent of Marylanders supported using more money for mass transit, even if it meant less spending on roads.

Coupled with rising gas prices, global warming and serious budget concerns, people want alternatives to their commutes, which often end up impacting quality of life, Schmidt-Perkins said.

Businesses also recognize the transit problem.

Donald Fry, president of the **Greater Baltimore Committee**, said the additional \$600 million his group wants for transportation should also be used to help move forward some transit projects.

While some jurisdictions focus on highways, "we think with the growth in population we're experiencing, with increased levels of traffic, we need to look for a comprehensive plan that includes fast, reliable, and easy to understand transit," Fry said.

Schmidt-Perkins said poll respondents were concerned with the rate of growth in the state, and strategic plans are needed to counter "willy-nilly building" of transit systems or roads.

"It's about congestion relief," she said, "but it's also about mobility, air quality, bay benefit. Building more miles of highway cannot do that."