

TRAFFIC, SMOG CHOKE ATLANTA'S ROADS TO GROWTH St. Louis Post-Dispatch (Missouri) September 7, 1998, Monday, FIVE STAR LIFT EDITION

## TRAFFIC, SMOG CHOKE ATLANTA'S ROADS TO GROWTH

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The bumper-to-bumper procession begins early in the morning. Grumbling drivers creep toward downtown, their cars filling the air with gray smog that hovers between the skyscrapers.

Atlanta, which once called itself "the city too busy to hate," has become the city too busy driving.

A study by the Environmental Protection Agency last year found that Atlantans had the longest average commute of any city in the world - 34.7 miles a day. Some people commute more than 120 miles a day round trip.

"The worst part about it is . . . I think about the lost production I could be using toward my job or toward leisure," said David Herman, 31, a marketing representative. He spends 90 minutes a day commuting from Marietta to Roswell, two north Atlanta suburbs that are less than 10 miles apart. "This is how much of my life I'm wasting on the road."

Atlanta has been growing nonstop for 30 years - and now growth is losing its appeal. The air is tainted by exhaust from 2.8 million cars, and Southern hospitality is being replaced by road rage.

Unlike other cities its size, Atlanta's public transportation system - MARTA - is not a viable alternative. The rail and bus system does not reach the populous suburbs north of the city because voters have rejected it, fearing it would bring inner-city problems such as crime and overdevelopment.

"The people here on my end of the county do not want public transportation in any form," said Cherokee County Commissioner J.J. Biello.

Traffic wasn't a major problem a decade ago, but as businesses and organizations moved to town (UPS, Holiday Inn, the American Cancer Society) and hometown companies expanded (Home Depot, Turner Broadcasting, Coca-Cola), the area began outgrowing its roads. The growth really took off in the years leading up to the 1996 Olympics.

"We really are a victim of our own success," said Jayne Hayse of the Atlanta Regional Commission.

More than 415,000 out-of-state residents have moved to Atlanta since 1990, more than the population of the city of St. Louis, and the growth isn't expected to slow soon.

Many people end up in subdivisions far outside town. The city of Atlanta itself has only about 400,000 residents; the city and the 10-county area known as its first tier of suburbs have a combined population of about 3.5 million.

The traffic is chasing many longtime residents away, including novelists Terry Kay and Anne Rivers Siddons, who said she moved to Charleston, S.C., because she wanted to live in a "gentler city."

The seeds of the traffic problems were planted long ago, when area leaders decided to focus on building more roads instead of a more complete public transit system, said Dana White, an urban studies professor at Emory University.

"Many of the same people preaching growth, growth, growth are now saying stop, stop, stop, but they're not saying how," he said.

The pollution from all the cars has jeopardized millions of dollars in federal road money because the city has failed to comply with the Clean Air Act.

Atlanta's traffic congestion costs more than \$ 1 billion a year in delays and wasted fuel, according to a recent report by the Texas Transportation Institute, which studies the country's most congested roadways.

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The most-talked about solutions are politically dangerous - increasing gasoline taxes, forcing companies to come up with alternative commuting plans for employees or expanding public transportation into the suburbs.

"Whether Atlanta's future will be as bright as many people hope it would be, I don't know," White said. "The Olympics may be looked on as the good ol' days."