



# ***Traffic Congestion and Rail Investment***

**Executive Summary of a National Survey**

*prepared for the*

**THE UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF MAYORS**

*and its*

**Council for Investment in the New American City**

*by*

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*Respondents in the ten metropolitan areas we tested in our survey believe that traffic has become a serious problem that will only get worse. A majority of those surveyed favor the idea of building commuter and light rail to ease the burden of commuting, and high-speed rail to allow them to travel more efficiently around their region and the entire country.*

*The survey was conducted in regions of the country other than California and the Northeast Corridor, where Amtrak now operates its Acela Express high speed train service. These excluded regions of the country account for substantial shares of total U.S. intercity passenger rail ridership as well as local transit ridership.*

## CURRENT CONDITIONS

Traffic has become a serious concern to inhabitants of metro areas in the West and South. When asked if traffic had gotten better, worse, or stayed the same in their areas over the past five years, 79% said conditions have gotten worse, while only 6% think things have improved. One out of two respondents not only believe that traffic has worsened, but believe that it is currently “much worse” than it was five years ago.

The vast majority of people also believe that traffic congestion has worsened nationwide, with 58% of people “strongly agreeing” with this statement, and 89% in agreement overall. Only 9% disagree, and feel that traffic has improved nationwide over the past few years.

Commuting has become a problem for many Americans. Only 14% think that their commute has improved while 41% say that it has gotten worse. If new roads are built, 66% of Americans do not

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think that congestion on the roads will be eased. They believe that if more roads are built, more people will drive, thus eliminating the potential benefits of new road construction. In addition, the majority of residents from our ten urban areas disagree with the idea that imposing tolls on highways is a fair and efficient way to relieve congestion (58%), with 40% “strongly disagreeing.”

The survey also finds that 71% of Americans feel that their access to public transportation remained the same or improved compared to five years ago, which starkly contrasts with their declining perceptions of traffic conditions. One in three Americans indicated that today, as compared to five years ago, they have better access to public transportation. Those living in areas where new rail systems have opened or are planned to debut (i.e. Dallas, Salt Lake City, Las Vegas), hold the most favorable views of these improvements in public transportation.

If no new transportation alternatives are offered during the next five-to-ten years, a large majority of respondents (68%) expect traffic conditions to worsen. Over four in ten respondents think that if no alternatives are offered, traffic will “worsen a great deal.”

## FUTURE ALTERNATIVES

If no new transportation alternatives are offered, individuals surveyed express support for a variety of rail options, from high-speed to light and commuter rail.

When discussing the new high-speed rail Acela train service provided by Amtrak in the Northeast Corridor, 62% said they would be interested in riding these new high-speed trains. In addition, a large majority of respondents living in the ten cities in which we surveyed people favor the creation of high-speed train service to serve their area and provide connections between major population areas. While 69% favor this idea overall, a solid 41% “strongly favor” having access to high-speed rail in their region.

In terms of finding the resources necessary to build a high-speed rail system in this country, people are almost unanimous (87%) in their belief that the United States Government currently possesses the resources to build such a system. Only one in twenty of those surveyed doubted the ability of the United States to assemble the resources to build a high-speed rail system.

There is also strong support for the idea of building light rail and commuter rail systems serving cities, suburbs, and entire regions. When asked if they would want these types of commuter rail services built so that they would have the option of traveling without using their cars, 80% of would favor such a project, while only 16% stand in opposition to this proposal.

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When asked whether they think the availability of an attractive and convenient rail service would have an effect on reducing traffic, 60% of Americans believe that it would have a “somewhat large impact” at the very least. When further asked what would be a convincing reason to spend public funds to build or improve rail systems in the respondent’s area, “a new rail service reducing traffic congestion” was a “convincing reason” to 68% of those surveyed. Finally, when told that a new rail system would “improve travel options for their neighborhood or local area,” 66% find this to be a “convincing” reason.

When we asked respondents in the ten cities and their surrounding area whether, “during the election campaign that recently ended, the candidates for President, Senate, or Congress gave attention to issues affecting quality of life, such as traffic, affordable housing, or urban sprawl,” an overwhelming 72% believe that the candidates paid either “a little attention” or “no attention at all” to these quality of life issues.

## METHODOLOGY

This telephone survey was conducted from December 19 – 28, 2000, among 1013 randomly selected registered voters.

The margin of error at the 95% confidence level is  $\pm 3.1\%$  on the overall sample.

Sub-samples have larger margins of error

*The areas below are metropolitan areas as defined by the United States Office of Management and Budget (OMB). We set regional interview quotas to receive an equal response from the ten test cities.*

*The regions are:*

- 10% Seattle
- 10% Salt Lake City
- 10% Las Vegas
- 10% Minneapolis
- 10% Chicago
- 10% Houston
- 10% Dallas
- 10% Tampa
- 10% Charlotte
- 10% Atlanta