



## THE PANDEMIC'S IMPACT: THE STATE OF MARYLAND TRAFFIC

"Transportation history is full of stories where something that was done temporarily turned out to be permanent, because people didn't want to go back," according to Jarrett Walker, an international transit consultant.

Those words could not be more accurate to describe life now. It's been nearly two years since the onset of the global pandemic, which has impacted nearly every aspect of life, including our transit and travel habits. In fact, the National Capital Region Transportation Planning Board announced survey results in February 2021 showing that 66% of those surveyed indicated that their daily travel habits have changed significantly since the beginning of the COVID pandemic – and that 38% expect to have a change to their travel habits one year *post-pandemic*.

Prior to COVID, 81% of those survey respondents used a car to travel to work at least three times a week. The survey also found that 26% of respondents reported that "nothing will make me more likely to ride public transportation after the pandemic is over."

So, how exactly have our views towards transportation changed in this amount of time?

### TRAFFIC DOWN, SPEEDING UP

We may recall spending all of our time at home in the Spring 2020. Not surprising, statewide highway traffic volumes fell dramatically during the height of the pandemic, dropping as much as 50%. The number of miles driven nationwide decreased by 15%.

While these numbers may not be surprising, what was unexpected was that traffic fatalities actually *increased* – at the same time traffic volume was cut in half. Police agencies – from Baltimore to Los Angeles – reported more speed-related crashes. Average speeds increased significantly above posted limits as roads saw less traffic. One Maryland officer reported some going as high as 130 miles per hour with the average speeder traveling at 90 miles per hour.

Meanwhile, Baltimore County saw a record

number of speed camera violations in 2020 as drivers became more aggressive with fewer people on the road during the shutdown. In fact, the county issued nearly 182,000 citations, a 10% increase from 2019.

The reality is that an increase in speeding leads to an increase in accidents and deaths, whether it be other drivers, those on bikes, or pedestrians. Preliminary data compiled by the National Safety Council shows that 42,000 people died in motor vehicle crashes in the U.S. in 2020, an increase of 24% over the previous year. Pedestrian fatality rates, meanwhile, jumped 21% -- the highest increase since 1975 – despite the fact that vehicle miles traveled dropped 13% due to the pandemic. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, a pedestrian is killed every two hours and injured every seven minutes somewhere in the U.S.

"We should be able to show a significant safety benefit from having less traffic," the National Safety Council said in January 2021. "Instead, in the midst of the worst health crisis in more than a century, we are

experiencing even deadlier roadways.”

Closer to home, nearly 40% of traffic deaths in the Washington, D.C. region occurred in Maryland’s Prince George’s County, where 99 people died, down only one from 2019. Meanwhile, Worcester County saw 11 fatalities out of 1,402 crashes in 2019 while Frederick County saw 24 fatal crashes out of 3,602 crashes.

Unfortunately, the numbers for 2021 do not appear to be going in the right direction. There have been 137 fatal crashes on Maryland state roads as of September 2021, versus 120 in September 2020. According to the Maryland State Police, crashes on Maryland state roads are up 17% for 2021.

All of these statistics point to a substantial problem, but what can be done to slow this trend of higher speeds and increased deaths on Maryland roads?

To counter this untenable state of affairs, the state enacted a Vision Zero strategy in 2019 aimed at eliminating all traffic fatalities and severe injuries. In September 2021, Governor Hogan announced that more than 90 agencies in Maryland will receive more than \$12 million in federal highway safety grants, as part of the state’s focus to prevent motor vehicle crashes and eliminate roadway fatalities. The state’s Department of Transportation Motor Vehicle Administration’s Highway Safety Office began dispersing the funds October 1, 2021, coming on the heels of the Hogan Administration announcing the distribution of nearly \$1 million in funding to focus on pedestrian and bicycle safety measures.



Examples of traffic calming measures being introduced around the state include speed bumps, roundabouts, medians, center turn lanes, and more, all designed to “encourage” drivers to slow down. Some communities are also experimenting with so-called “road diets,” reducing the number of vehicle travel lanes or narrowing existing lanes to force vehicles to drive slower while providing bike traffic or pedestrians with sufficient room to travel safely.

### **DOES MORE TRAFFIC EQUAL THE NEED FOR MORE ROADS?**

We’ve seen both Maryland beltways continue to widen over the years. Currently, Maryland’s “Traffic Relief Plan” revolves around widening I-270 in suburban Montgomery County. The Maryland Department of Transportation plans to

proceed with Phase 1 South, providing a new, wider American Legion Bridge and include two high-occupancy toll (HOT) lanes across the American Legion Bridge to I-270 and North on I-270 to I-370.

Keep in mind, there are important ancillary benefits that come from updates and additions. The construction of the HOT lanes along I-270 and I-95 will have a positive impact. There will be a reduced amount of congestion based upon 20- or 25-year projections because vehicles will no longer be stuck in slow moving traffic in either the high occupancy toll lanes or the general-purpose lanes. The congestion that exists on I-270 and I-95 causes *more* pollution because the slower vehicles are moving or when stopped, more pollution occurs. This is why many new automobiles shut off when you are stopped at a stop sign or a traffic signal. Idling and slow-moving traffic increase pollution. So, the idea about not increasing pollution by not increasing the HOT lanes is counter-intuitive to the goals and objective of reducing pollution.

### **A THIRD BAY BRIDGE?**

But Maryland’s traffic problems aren’t just centered around the two beltways. Those who live near the Bay Bridge or enjoy a vacation at the beach know all too well that going to and from the Eastern Shore in the summer months can be brutal. I am often asked what can be done to reduce traffic surrounding the Bay Bridge. The simplest solution is for hotel and condo owners to realize that there would not be a loss in revenue if a third of the rentals began on Friday, a third began on Saturday, and a





third on Sunday. By adjusting check-in and checkout days, traffic would be reduced dramatically. Until that happens, we can expect miles-long traffic backups.

In 2019, the Maryland Transportation Authority released the results of a study on how to address the growing traffic congestion associated with the Bay Bridge. The study focused on the impact of a third Bay Bridge. Even before the pandemic, America's love affair with the car was not going anywhere. Now conditioned to social distancing, we see increased vehicle dependency. Ultimately, an additional Bay Bridge will be needed.

To keep traffic flowing throughout the Eastern Shore and to and from the Western Shore, other areas would need significant changes as well. When the second Bay Bridge was completed in 1973, part of the plan was to eliminate traffic signals on Kent Island in Queen Anne's County and indeed, it made a huge difference. If a third Bay Bridge were built, the traffic signals along US Route 50 from the Queenstown Outlets to at least MD 404 would need to be eliminated.

Other significant challenges remain in the towns of Easton and Cambridge, in part due to the size of the main routes through each town. A "ripple effect" of a third bridge might require a bypass in both Easton and Cambridge to eliminate traffic tie-ups for locals. We need look no further than Salisbury to see that the bypass has significantly reduced in-town tourist traffic.

### MASS TRANSIT – IS THIS THE SOLUTION?

Given where things stand with traffic throughout Maryland, should more emphasis be placed on mass transit projects? That's hard to say. Here again, the pandemic has had a major life-altering impact. Since the Coronavirus pandemic, people who previously relied on buses, subway, or ride hailing services are opting for alternatives to sharing space with strangers. It was noted by the Guardian that 47 percent of consumers plan to reduce usage of public transportation in the future.

Furthermore, an article published by Bloomberg in December 2020 found that Marc trains that used to carry 800,000 people a month have been frozen at about 10 percent of their pre-pandemic level. Urban bus ridership has generally settled at



about 50 percent of pre-pandemic conditions. In one survey, 40% of respondents stated that nothing would make them more likely to take the bus.

These are sobering numbers when a taxpayer begins to think about Maryland's proposed mass transit projects. The Purple Line light rail system in Prince George's and Montgomery Counties will cost at least \$345 million per mile. For a little over 16 miles, that is a total of \$5.6 billion!

And while Baltimore's Red Line was laid to rest six years ago, Senators Ben Cardin and Chris Van Hollen are trying to revive the project. Baltimore's Red Line was projected to cost \$2.9 billion for 14 miles or \$205 million per mile for the Woodlawn-to-Bayview stretch. But, for subways, a minimum population density of 47 people per acre is required, while for light rail a minimum population density of 28-60 people per acre is required. To put it in perspective, Baltimore City has approximately 650,000 people on 58,800 acres, or less than 12 people per acre - far below the minimum population density requirements. Simply put, based on the numbers alone, building the Red Line light rail would be a huge economic mistake for Baltimore City.

In general, America is at a crossroads. Only time will tell how quickly or if commuters will ever return to using public transportation.

### IN CONCLUSION

While it is hard not to dwell on the previous two years or the future two years, the reality is that we need to be looking out

into the future 20 to 30 years, or more. Maryland will continue to grow and add households and employment at dramatic levels. According to the 2020 census, Maryland's population is 6.2 million, growing by at least 7 percent each decade. Surprisingly, the fastest growing city in Maryland is the Salisbury metro area. Its population grew by nearly 15 percent from 2010 to 2020.

We know that transit, by itself, can't solve the traffic problems because our country cannot afford to build transit wherever new development occurs. If cities want to increase use of transit, they need to increase density. If you want to decrease pollution, increase transit, and increase the use of HOT lanes. There is no single solution, but "a million little things" that can ultimately help to reduce congestion and pollution.

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