

washingtonpost.com Personalize Your Post | Go to mywashingtonpost.com

Home News Politics Entertainment Live Discussions Photos Marketplace Jobs

ADVERTISING

**www.turfvalley.com**  
 RESORT, CONFERENCE CENTER, & SPA  
 ELLICOTT CITY, MD

Navigate to Sections  SEARCH:   Search Of

News

**A Cheaper, Faster Way**  
 Subtle Answers Offered for Region's Traffic Jams

By Katherine Shaver  
 Washington Post Staff Writer  
 Sunday, October 26, 2003; Page C01

First in a series

Whenever Tina Kinney hears politicians offer ways to fix the traffic jams that extend her hour-long commute and determine everything from where she lives to when she buys groceries, she rarely hears solutions that would ease her pain today, this year or even next.

ADVERTISING

Most often, Kinney said, discussions about reducing traffic seem to get stuck for years in debates over whether to build mega-projects that would cost hundreds of millions of dollars and do little to help her life in the short-term.

"I hear about the Springfield Mixing Bowl. I hear about expanding the Capital Beltway. That's about it," said Kinney, 30, a research scientist from Falls Church who commutes to Georgetown. "I hear about these huge, expensive projects, but there are other common-sense ways to improve traffic flow that don't cost a lot of money or involve tearing down homes or increasing pollution."

What about doing faster, cheaper things, Kinney said, such as fixing confusing road signs that cause motorists to swerve from lane to lane, leaving a line of brake lights behind them? Or having a public education campaign to teach drivers how to keep traffic moving while they merge? Or making intersections safer for pedestrians so people will feel more comfortable walking instead of driving?

"I get very frustrated because I feel like there's so much that could be done -- simple, common-sense things," Kinney said.



enlarge photo  
 Opponents of building more road term solution is to focus develop stops and move away from car- (Mark Gail -- The Washington P

—Traffic—

• [Live Traffic and Trans Information](#)

—Springfield Inter

- [A Cheaper, Faster Wa](#) Washington Post, Oct 26,
- [Driving Hot Spots](#) (Th Post, Oct 12, 2003)
- [Driving Hot Spots](#) (Th Post, Sep 14, 2003)
- [More Stories](#)

**QUICK JOB SEARCH**  
 Search 15,000 job listings.

**KEYWORDS**


**COUNTY**

**INDUSTRY**

**Advanced Search** Search Function, Featured Employ

—Free E-mail New:

**1/2 Off  
The  
Second  
Item  
Plus No  
Interest  
Charges  
till 2006  
Sale!**



**For every room  
there's a  
MARLO**

When asked for relatively quick, affordable ways to reduce traffic, Kinney and other Post readers had plenty of ideas: Crack down on double-parked vehicles that create bottlenecks. Remind highway drivers, particularly on the Beltway, that the left lane is for passing.

Make it easier for commuters to work at least some days from home. Eliminate more street parking on busy thoroughfares during rush hours. Retime signals to keep vehicles moving from one green light to the next. Add a lane to intersections that back up from cars waiting to turn. Fill gaps in sidewalks and bike paths so people can avoid driving a half-mile to the grocery store.

Traffic experts solicited for ideas had plenty, too. Among them:

Let commuters willing to forgo driving collect the cash value of their parking spaces to spend on bus or train fare.

Invest in longer-lasting pavements so that roads are ripped up less often.

Greatly increase the number of tow trucks that can respond to and quickly clear accidents and broken-down vehicles that create as many as half of all backups.

Build cut-through paths linking cul-de-sacs to create shorter, safer and more direct ways to walk or ride bikes out of subdivisions.

**Possibilities for Progress**

Some of the ideas are working in other traffic-jammed cities. Many are gaining support among both pro-development and anti-sprawl groups, bridging a political divide that some local officials blame for a stalemate on traffic-fighting solutions in the Washington region. None is on the grand, ribbon-cutting scale of the massive rebuilding of the Woodrow Wilson Bridge or Springfield interchange. And none alone, specialists say, can stem the tide of traffic that will accompany the continued growth in jobs and population.

However, specialists say, a combination of them could help the Washington region in two significant ways: They would help make drive times more reliable and, just as important, would offer more alternatives to stewing in backups.

"I've been living here now more than five years, and I just hear about studies and bickering back and forth," said Brad Jones, 30, a Centreville resident who commutes three hours round trip daily in traffic and aboard crowded Metro trains to his job at the Consumer Electronics Association in Arlington County. "It's time to put that aside and make something happen in the short-term. I

- [News Headlines](#)
- [News Alert](#)

[Subscribe to The Wash](#)

-  [E-Mail This Article](#)
-  [Printer-Friendly V](#)
-  [Permission to Rep](#)

always joke that by the time I can enjoy Metro out to Dulles, I'll be retired."

Jones said employers could do much more to improve the morning and evening rush by allowing more people to work from home. Granting buses their own lane on Interstate 66 to avoid the daily crawl also would make transit faster and more attractive than driving, he said.

Roger Dewey, 56, of Burke said it would be naive to believe that most of the large highway or transit projects being discussed would be done in time to help his commute.

"It's taken how many years to build the Springfield Mixing Bowl?" said Dewey, who drives two hours round trip daily to his job as a document reviewer for a Department of Energy contractor in College Park. "The ICC [intercounty connector], if it ever gets built at all, will probably take six or eight or more years."

Dewey suggested forming a regional panel with the power to coordinate traffic-fighting efforts, such as by making sure lights on roads that cross jurisdiction lines are synchronized.

The Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments has a Transportation Planning Board made up of elected leaders and transportation officials from Maryland, the District and Northern Virginia. However, it has no authority to raise or spend money.

Members do not coordinate traffic-fighting measures as much as sign off on projects that the various transportation departments request and make sure that any projected emissions from new roads or transit proposals won't push the region over federal pollution limits.

"I've been living in this area since 1983," Dewey said, "and I don't think there's been a concerted and coordinated effort for that whole 20 years to solve the traffic problems."

#### **Steps Too Small?**

Advocates for expanding the highway network say only more roads and Potomac River crossings connecting fast-growing suburbs will make a noticeable dent in today's congestion while helping the region keep pace with what's coming. Environmental groups say the long-term solution lies not in building and widening roads, but in focusing development around transit stops and moving away from the car-dependent sprawl that creates more traffic.

The debate has grown more contentious in the past decade, often blocking attempts to reach any agreement on plans to combat congestion, local officials said. But today, many public officials and transportation experts are beginning to focus on shorter-term, affordable and less-controversial fixes. That is partly because nobody has the money to fix the big problems, whether they be via transit systems or roads. Some transportation planners also say shifting the

focus could help the region get beyond a roads-vs.-transit stalemate that has diverted attention from other potential traffic busters.

"I think there has been a kind of paralysis of decision-making for the years I've been here," said Ronald F. Kirby, transportation planning director for the Council of Governments since 1987. "The little things that could have been done kind of got lost in the larger debate. . . . The bigger issue of whether to build more roads or not was so overwhelming in people's minds that they just didn't want to talk about anything else until they settled those issues."

Dan Tangherlini, the District's transportation director, said he is trying to focus on relatively inexpensive but effective measures, such as adding 100 Internet-connected traffic cameras by year's end to help motorists avoid backups when they plan their routes.

"I think it's appropriate for people to focus on the big debates, but we need to recognize that the real impact for most people most of the time is going to be from these smaller improvements," Tangherlini said. "Over the last 50 years, probably all our organizations have been distracted a bit too much by the big projects."

#### **Using What's There**

Transportation departments that have focused on building highways and interchanges are starting to look more at small ways to improve the efficiency of what they've already built. Tom Farley, Northern Virginia administrator for the Virginia Department of Transportation, said some intersections have gotten so clogged that they need "spot improvements" immediately.

Budgets for building anything new in Northern Virginia have been slashed, and voters last year defeated a measure that would have raised the sales tax to generate money for transportation projects.

"If you're talking about new transportation facilities without talking about how you can maximize what you already have," Farley said, "we may be giving the public false expectations."

Jessica Hahn, 35, said she and her husband, Peter, 33, chat about that daily during their often sluggish 44-mile round-trip commute between Reston and their jobs at a public relations firm in Dupont Circle. Jessica Hahn said they spot numerous ways the roads could be used more efficiently.

Why not make I-66 inside the Beltway HOV-only in both directions during the rush period? How about opening up the comparatively empty airport-only lanes of the Dulles Toll Road to all traffic during the rush for vehicles with E-ZPass electronic toll readers? How about cracking down on pedestrians who bring traffic to a halt by crossing streets outside of crosswalks and targeting motorists who double-park on narrow city streets?

By making such smaller, relatively low-cost changes, Hahn said, "you might