February 13, 2007

The Case Against Roads

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A couple of recent Florida Times-Union articles were almost giddy in their anticipation of a dozen or so new road projects. Some of these projects involve entirely new roadways, while others involve adding lanes to existing roads. One article in the Business section described these projects as a "road to growth," asserting confidently that these projects "would lead to economic growth in the area." Another article stated that construction crews are working to "ease the commute for millions of workers."

In short, the conventional wisdom in this community is that new roads (and especially new limited-access highways) reduce congestion, which somehow leads to economic growth — a view so widely held that Times-Union reporters treat it as fact, rather than making the argument in the Opinion pages where it belongs. But one of these T.U. articles admitted that these projects will "open up new areas for more development." In other words, the projects will cause people and businesses to move to undeveloped areas, either on the fringes of Duval County or outside the county. And as those areas have more people and more jobs, they will become more congested, not less.

For example, let us suppose (as the Times-Union's editorial page suggests) that government should build an outer beltway connecting Nassau, Clay and St. Johns counties. If a new beltway makes it easier to commute from the First Coast's "outer counties," more people will eventually move to those counties, and businesses will relocate to those counties in order to follow their customers and employees. More people driving more cars means, of course, more congestion in the long run — at least in Nassau, Clay and St. Johns.

But won't beltway-induced sprawl reduce congestion in Duval County? After all, a Jacksonville that has lost thousands of
people and jobs to the outer counties should lose thousands of cars, right? Not necessarily. Some of the people moving to the outer counties will still commute to Duval County, and they will have to drive throughout the county to reach their destinations. Similarly, some of the people who stay in Duval County will have to drive to jobs that have relocated to Nassau and St. Johns counties. Suppose Jane's cousin Hank lives six miles from downtown Jacksonville and commutes six miles from home. His job moves to St. Johns County, just south of the Duval County line and 12 miles from Hank's home. That means Hank's Duval-only commute increases from six miles (from his home to downtown) to about 12 (his total commuting length minus the portion of his commute that is in St. Johns). If Hank's situation is common enough, the outer beltway may mean that motorists will be driving more miles even in Duval County, which means more congestion.

History supports the view that freeways don't reduce congestion. According to the Texas Transportation Institute (a think-tank funded by the Texas Highway Department) Jacksonville's freeway mileage almost doubled between 1982 and 2003 (from 390 lane-miles to 725 lane-miles), yet congestion increased. Annual delay per peak-period traveler increased from 8 hours to 34 hours. (source)

Regardless of their effects on congestion, new roads outside Duval County may actually reduce economic growth by weakening the region's core and its older suburbs. If new roads make it

easier for well-off people to move to outer suburbs, Duval will have fewer middle-class taxpayers and jobs, which means that Duval will have higher taxes and worse services, which means even more middle-class flight. Perhaps upscale in-town neighborhoods like San Marco will be able to hang on: There will always be a few eccentrics around who value being able to walk to shops and restaurants, perhaps enough to keep property values high. But Duval County suburbs like Baymeadows, Mandarin and Southside are in far more danger.

These places are no more walkable or aesthetically appealing than their counterparts outside Duval County. So if middle-class families move to outer suburbs, some Duval suburbs will simply be unable to compete; property values will flatten out, schools will deteriorate, and Duval's suburbs will deteriorate just as older automobile-dependent areas around Beach Boulevard and Philips Highway deteriorated when faced with competition from newer, shinier areas such as Baymeadows and Southside. In short, sprawl is a revolution that eats its own children.

And if history is any guide, expressway-driven sprawl means more vehicle miles traveled: Between 1982 and 2003, Jacksonville vehicle miles traveled more than doubled (from just over 13,000 to just over 30,000). That means that in 2003, there were 32.9 miles driven daily per First Coast resident on the region's roads, up from 22.4 miles in 1982.

And as Jacksonville's drivers go farther, they pollute more. This pollution may have global as well as regional consequences: If (as some scientists believe) carbon dioxide emissions contribute to global warming and natural disasters such as hurricanes, Jacksonville's road-builders are actually playing a tiny role in making Jacksonville less competitive. A warmer climate and more violent coastal weather mean that warm-weather coastal cities like Jacksonville become less appealing to people and businesses, while cold-weather inland cities like Minneapolis and Indianapolis become more appealing.

Moreover, more vehicle miles traveled mean more money spent on oil, much of which goes into Arab countries that are chock-full of Islamic extremists. To the extent America's oil addiction bolsters the economies of countries such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, this means that more of our dollars will go to Islamofascists, some of whom will use their oil wealth to finance terrorism.

Big Brother argues that roads merely follow development rather than track it; for example, one government planner stated in the Times-Union article: "We're looking to see where people will be living 10, 15, 20 years from now, and where they're working." But this argument is a self-fulfilling prophecy: If government decides that people will move to Clay County, and builds roads to make it easier for people to move there, even more people will move there.

Indeed, even supporters of the sprawl industry admit this point. For example, in 2002, the National Association of Home Builders conducted a survey asking people what factors would encourage them to move to a new subdivision, and 44 percent picked "highway access" — the highest percentage out of 18 factors listed. (source)

It could be argued that other ways of reducing congestion (such as increasing public transit) have

not been successful in other cities. Although a full treatment of this issue is best left for another article, it seems to me that this argument presents a false dichotomy: Plunder the taxpayers for costly new transit improvements or plunder the taxpayers to build another expressway.

In fact, we need not do either. We could cut taxes and spending and focus our transportation resources on maintaining our existing roads and bus system — thus avoiding the harmful consequences of new roads, leaving taxpayers with more money in their pockets, and bolstering rather than reducing economic growth. In addition, we might want to invest in making existing roads more pedestrian-and bicycle-friendly, by building more sidewalks — and by narrowing roads instead of widening them.