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Dom Nozzi: Congestion is our friend

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Everyone agrees that traffic **congestion** is awful and should be minimized. Right? Perhaps not.

By unintentionally joining promoters of sprawl by fighting **congestion**, smart growth advocates indirectly promote bigger roads, because that's the default (and counterproductive) way to reduce **congestion**.

Communities with free-flowing traffic and big roads fuel sprawl, environmental destruction, and the loss of transportation and lifestyle choice.

Is **congestion** really the unmitigated enemy of humanity? Consider:

1. **Congestion** is a powerful disincentive for sprawl; sprawl that steamrolls outlying ecosystems. With **congestion**, the sprawl market withers.
2. **Congestion** leads to a regional reduction in air pollution and fuel consumption (because "low-value" car trips are reduced, more people travel in non-car ways, and more people live closer to their destinations).
3. **Congestion** leads to a reduction in average car speeds.
4. **Congestion** creates more healthy retail and residential in the core area of a community (because infill development, mixed use, and higher densities are more likely).
5. **Congestion** creates political pressure to create a quality transit, bicycle, and walking system. Large numbers of citizens become enraged by the **congestion** and demand that politicians do something to alleviate it. And communities soon realize it is unaffordable to continue to ruin themselves by widening roads.
6. **Congestion** promotes infill, mixed use and higher residential densities, because a large number of citizens increasingly desire to live closer to their jobs, their schools and their shopping to avoid **congestion**. **Congestion** is also a sign of a healthy community that has resisted the ruinous temptation to build its way out of it with monster-sized roads.

I do not necessarily encourage **congestion**. As any economist would say, the best way to ease **congestion** is

to charge fees (i.e., tolls) for use of the road, particularly during rush hour. But because motorists have long been spoiled by motorist welfare subsidies, we have come to expect free roads. Any suggestion to charge for use of roads is furiously opposed.

So what is a "second best" option for discouraging the "low-value" car trips that crowd **our** roads? **Congestion**; a condition that does not impose a financial fee on driving, but does impose a time fee.

Does this mean that we must resign ourselves to being "stuck in traffic"? No. Just that we must restore transportation and housing choices in **our** communities.

We must create travel options so that if **congestion** is awful, we can opt to use transit, a bicycle or a sidewalk to avoid the **congestion**. A community where we have the choice to live in a location that is close enough to **our** daily destinations so that we can reduce **our** need to be stuck in traffic.

Another mistake: contending that successful transit, bicycle and walking systems will noticeably reduce **congestion**. A growing community will always see its roads congested if it is a healthy, attractive place.

Within cities, smart growth advocates must start looking upon **congestion** as a **friend**. Otherwise, they unintentionally ally themselves with the sprawl lobby.

Indeed, traffic **congestion** is a sign of a healthy community. A sign that a community has such attractive features that a great many people want to be there. Because it takes so few cars to congest a street, a lack of **congestion** during popular hours indicates a serious community dysfunction.

To paraphrase Robert Cole, any place worth its salt has a **congestion** "problem."

Note that "libertarians" claim that Americans "freely choose" to drive everywhere and live in sprawl locations. That it is a restriction in freedom to discourage such a lifestyle, ignoring the fact that such a lifestyle reduces the ability of a community to provide other lifestyle and travel choices, and thereby forces people to only be able to live the auto-dependent lifestyle.

An important condition that these sprawl apologists conveniently fail to acknowledge is that this large consumer demand for auto-dependent sprawl is fueled, significantly, by a market heavily distorted with enormous government subsidies (such as free roads, free parking, underpriced gas and unpaid emergency services). End those subsidies (totaling over \$174 billion each year in the early 1990s), and the substantially different "price signals" that Americans experience will encourage radical changes in travel and lifestyle.

Price signals that are not distorted by subsidies will mean that most Americans will no longer be screaming so loudly to protect the auto-dependent lifestyle.

The great irony is that the "libertarian" supposedly abhors government subsidies, yet are happy to overlook auto/sprawl subsidies. Why the double standard?

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