

County's traffic woes likely to worsen and there's no quick fix

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If there's a barrier to continued economic growth in Williamson County, it might be the ability of area roads to accommodate the traffic that growth generates.

County drivers are fighting up to eight times more traffic than they did seven years ago and by all reports, it's likely to get a lot worse before it gets better.

From Concord Road to Cool Springs Boulevard, many of the county's main roads have seen traffic-count increases from 20 to 80 percent in the last seven years according to the Tennessee Department of Transportation.

"I think the growth is just beyond most people's imaginations," says Eric Gardner, Franklin's assistant city manager.

Williamson's population grew by 56 percent from 1990 to 2000, jumping from 81,000 to more than 126,000 residents during that time. Meanwhile, the people and the companies keep coming.

Williamson County Development Director Joe Horne says part of the traffic problem is that municipalities don't have complete say over how the roads running through their jurisdictions are developed. Horne works with all county municipalities and coordinates with TDOT's regional planning arm.

"The roads don't end at one boundary and problems tend to spill over in other people's jurisdictions," he says.

He says he'd like to see municipal governments step up and inform TDOT of problem areas, since they know their own transportation problems best.

Horne says another problem is that some municipalities assume maintaining state routes is solely TDOT's job.

"You can't expect the department of transportation to fix all of Williamson County's problems, because they are charged with maintaining and providing a transportation system for all (95) counties," he says.

Before road projects make it onto the state's official "to-do" list, a corridor study has to be conducted. The results are included in TDOT's long-range plan, which currently stretches transportation goals to 2030. Improvements have to be budgeted as part of TDOT's three-

year transportation improvement program, the department's equivalent of capital improvements budget.

Further complicating the local traffic situation is that each municipality has its own priorities, which often leads to inter-jurisdictional wrangling.

Gardner says, for example, some of the state routes that run through downtown Franklin have been preserved for character's sake - something which caused some head-butting between local engineers and TDOT officials.

Another factor, says Mike Harris, Brentwood's director of engineering, is that many local traffic impact studies are myopic and don't consider the big picture.

"How far away from the development do you look, for example?" Harris asks, noting impact can spread as far away from a project as interstate ramps, while a developer might only be required to add a turn lane or widen a small portion of road directly in front of its subdivision.

Harris also notes that development is self-propagating. For instance, **Nissan** chose Cool Springs for its headquarters and others followed. Horne says that cascading effect makes some road improvements futile because you can never build yourself out of the congestion.

Harris says he relies on citizens to tell him what areas need the most attention. Brentwood also conducts its own traffic counts and uses them to plan local projects.

While there's no quick fix to ease county travel times, there is a laundry list of projects on state, county and city levels either in the works or on the drawing board.

Franklin residents will see a new interchange at Interstate 65 and McEwen Drive by year's end as well as an extended Carother's Parkway. They will also see a full-circle Mack Hatcher Parkway, although that construction is not imminent.

Harris says Concord Road in Brentwood will be widened from Edmondson Pike to Nolensville Road in 2010 and in the meantime new signals will be installed.

Horne says he's pushing efforts to expand Interstate-65 from Highway 96 to the Goose Creek Bypass and widen Columbia Highway as far as Thompson Station Road. He says he also wants to see Highway 96 eastbound improved, but the funding for that isn't a sure thing.

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