

Nashville region is 2nd in U.S. in miles traveled per person

Analysts say commutes hurt business, families



Rush-hour traffic flows toward and away from downtown Nashville on I-65 on Monday. ALAN POIZNER / FOR THE TENNESSEAN

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Stephen Warren's daily commute between his Murfreesboro home and Vanderbilt University is 44 miles each way, a drive that can gobble up anywhere from 50 minutes to two hours, stretching his workday from 6:30 a.m. to 7 p.m.

"It's a lot of time away from home for an eight-hour day," said Warren, a father of two boys.

The commutes of residents like Warren, combined with all the freight trucks taking advantage of three major interstate highways, make the Nashville region one of the most auto-centric metro areas in the nation.

According to a study being released today by the Brookings Institution, the region ranked second in the United States in 2005 in vehicle miles traveled per capita. The area's 1.4 million residents, plus buses and freight carriers, drove more than 20.5 billion miles that year. They averaged more than 14,400 miles each, according to federal data cited by Brookings, an independent think tank based in Washington, D.C.

The cost of all that driving can be high, experts and commuters said. Businesses lose productivity. Families lose time together. The environment loses ground.

"Vehicles are the single-highest air quality problem source we have," said Laura Artates, board chairwoman of the Clean Air Partnership of Middle Tennessee. "Over 50 percent of air pollution comes from automobiles."

Amy Liu, deputy director of the Brookings Institution's Metropolitan Policy Program, said the congestion contributes to "a worsening quality of life." She said the federal government hasn't done enough to help local and state leaders get money to reduce congestion and fix aging roads and bridges; instead, it has spent money on pork-barrel projects.

"The way people talk about transportation locally is not the way the feds talk about it," Liu said.

Worker morale affected

The Nashville area generally lacks mass transit beyond municipal buses and the Music City Star commuter rail, which runs between Nashville and Wilson County.

As a result, "people don't have a lot of choices in a lot of cases," Artates said.

"They pretty much have to get in their car."

Warren, senior director of human resources operations at Vanderbilt, said he would take a train to work if he could.

For now, he watches in frustration each day as it becomes increasingly difficult to make his way along Interstate 24.

"When I started at Vanderbilt (six years ago), I could leave the house and be here within 45 minutes," Warren said.

"The last two years, it's a crapshoot. ... At times, it's a parking lot."

Mark Gorman, who works for the Tennessee Department of Labor in the MetroCenter area, said he has a pretty easy 12-to-15-minute commute from the Scottsboro community in Davidson County.

But some of his co-workers aren't as lucky.

"The amount of stress it causes some of our employees, it can cut into productivity and morale," Gorman said.

The Brookings Institution report, "MetroNation," also says the Nashville, Memphis, Knoxville and Chattanooga metro areas are all among the nation's 100 largest.

The Nashville area accounts for 23.9 percent of Tennessee's population and contributes 27.1 percent of the jobs and 30.5 percent of the state's economy, the study says.

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