

Our Changing Economy

D.C. Transportation Cost Likely to Rise

By Philip Stoddard Brown

Transportation has been one of the fields of greatest technological development in the past 20 years. But this development has provided no release of personal income or tax revenues for other uses.



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Travel costs constitute about one-eighth of personal expenditures—a larger fraction than they used to — and it may be that it now takes longer to get to and from work. The percentage of tax revenues allocated for streets, highways, bridges and airports has also risen.

Moreover, the cost of transportation in this area is expected to increase in the years ahead without much gain in commuting time — and certainly no gain in pleasure.

The proposals of the Mass Transportation Survey, designed to outline new expressways and transit facilities in the Washington area for a future population of 3 million have a price tag of \$2.5 billion. This staggering sum is not much less than the present market value of all buildings in the District. Moreover, it is over and above the cost of all maintenance work and minor improvements in our street and highway system.

The forthcoming 10-pound document on transportation embodies the most comprehensive analysis ever made of the patterns of residential life and of work in Washington. Its proposals have been devised by engineers to satisfy our particular needs. It is a pioneering effort that deserves —and will require—a lot of study.

Some Cool Perspective Needed

It's going to require also some cool perspective to judge the proposals of this study fairly, once the controversy over them gets heated, as it surely will. So perhaps this is the time to raise two questions.

First, how much should be spent on transportation? How much do we want to pay in tolls and taxes for it, in preference to other goods and services?

Greater traffic congestion is not the only alternative to adopting the proposed program in its entirety. There are many possibilities: greater staggering of working hours, more decentralization, prohibition of street parking — and perhaps even the use of private cars — in some areas at certain hours, toll charges varied according to time of day and maybe by size of car. These and other restrictions have a price tag too in terms of the convenience and working efficiency of some people.

The other question is how can the improvements in travel provided by new bridge, expressways and possibly rail-transit facilities be preserved, not lost — as they have been in the past — by a quick buildup of traffic to the previous peak of congestion.

City Has Some Available Remedies

A city can't control immigration and commerce by the direct means that a sovereign country does, but it has plenty of other powers. It can use zoning and building-permit regulations to control the use of land — that is, the purpose and density of use. By taxation, it can make users of land, streets and other public facilities pay their proper share, or refrain from use. The Federal Government can locate its agencies where they will create the fewest transportation problems; they can provide off-street parking for employees or give transportation to parking areas.

Ours can be one of many cities. Each type of city has a price in terms of taxes, living costs, working efficiency and pleasure of living. The most expensive may not be the most desirable from a residential or business point of view.

This may be the time to adopt some radically new plans —plans that would change the character and speed of area development and the role of the private passenger car.

Washington began as a Federal City — and a planned city. As recently as 1930, it was still federally administered — still developing in accordance with a central plan. Then in 30 years' time its population tripled. The growth burst the political boundaries of the District.

Urgent Problems Go Unresolved

Today, Washington is no longer federally administered—no longer a planned city. Economically, it is a single city; politically, it is not. Consequently, economic activity suffers. Urgent problems involving airports, bridges, expressways, water storage and sanitation go unresolved for years, for lack of central planning and the lack of a central forum and decision making body.

Without a plan for metropolitan growth and enough metropolitan government to enforce such a plan, the Congress and local residents can pay \$2.5 billions for superhighways and other billions for rehabilitation and there will still be traffic congestion and deterioration of property values.

The Joint Committee of Congress on Washington Metropolitan Problems in its final report in January discussed the problems of growth, provocatively and wisely. Let us hope that this Committee when it holds hearings on the Mass Transportation Study, will ask and reask a thousand times: "For what kind of city are we designing a transportation system?" and "How much do we want to pay for transportation, and how much for other public facilities?"

Already we pay a tremendous price for transportation. Maybe it is too little . . . My own hunch is that it's too much: that we sacrifice too many welfare, recreational and cultural projects for the luxury of driving and parking our 18- and 19-foot land cruisers where and when we choose.