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Brookings Ranks 50 States, 100 Largest Metropolitan Areas for “Driving Footprint”

Nevada, Idaho, Colorado Lead the Way in Ending Car-Dependence

Metro Driving Down in Austin, Indianapolis, Atlanta; Up in New Orleans

(Washington, DC) – America is experiencing its longest and steepest drop in driving, signaling a permanent shift away from reliance on the car to other modes of transportation, according to a new Brookings Institution report released today. In the coming years, this shift will have far reaching implications for transportation, environmental, energy, and land-use planning.

Entitled, “The Road... Less Traveled: An Analysis of Vehicle Miles Traveled Trends in the U.S.,” the report also presents a first-of-its kind survey which ranks all 50 states and the nation’s 100 largest metro areas for their “driving footprint” and shows who drives the most, who drives the least, and where driving is declining the fastest.

“The American driver has hit a wall,” stated Robert Puentes, author of the report and a fellow at the Metropolitan Policy Program at Brookings. “We are now driving the same distance per year as we did in 1998.”

Reinforcing the Brookings’ findings, the Federal Highway Administration data released on Friday show the driving decline continued in October. “Even though gasoline prices declined sharply from September through October, drivers didn’t get back in their cars,” said Puentes.

Puentes added: “With important conversations underway on infrastructure spending as economic stimulus, it’s critical for the new Congress and administration to recognize the long-term implications of these travel trends and to use this as an occasion to put forth a new vision that reflects new realities and is not just more of the same.”

The number of miles that Americans have traveled in their cars (“Vehicle Miles Traveled” or VMT) started to slow as far back as 2004 - long before the extreme fluctuation in gas prices and the start of the economic slowdown - and has been falling since 2007. From October 2007 to September 2008, for example, we drove 90 billion fewer miles than the same time period the year before. For the first time in our history, the amount of roadway available to drivers is outpacing the number of miles we actually drive. Transit use, interestingly, is at its highest level since the 1950’s, and Amtrak just set a ridership record this year.

The Brookings report identifies a variety of factors as responsible for the decline in driving: market saturation of vehicle ownership, the plateau in the number of women entering the workforce, a possible ceiling in the amount of driving any one individual can tolerate, increased ridership on mass transit, the development of commercial centers closer to home,

and rising unemployment.

There is a down side: fewer drivers on the road have brought revenues from the gas tax, the primary source of funding for transportation projects, to all-time lows.

“Our ending love affair with the car has tremendous implications for transportation policy,” stated Adie Tomer, Research Analyst at the Metropolitan Policy Program at Brookings. “As gas tax receipts plummet, we will have to get smarter about how we spend our transportation dollars. We cannot afford to build more roads that people simply will not use. We run the very real risk of severely misallocating scarce resources.”

This trend, however, is largely positive for the nation, the report contends. Lower fuel consumption is vital to our energy security and for mitigating climate change, traffic fatalities are down, and urban centers are becoming denser and more accessible.

Topmost among the stories told by this analysis are state trends. Southeastern and Intermountain West states, for example, experienced the largest growth rates in driving between 1991 and 2006, while the Great Lakes, Northeastern and Pacific states grew at a slower pace. But by 2008, 48 states had seen declines in the per capita driving rates of their residents.

Today, drivers in Nevada, Idaho and Colorado are leading the way in ending their addiction to the car. The only states with a jump up in driving (total VMT) since 2006 are North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, Oklahoma, and Wyoming.

State	Greatest Drop in VMT Per Capita Dec. 2006 - Sept. 2008
Nevada	-7.3%
Idaho	-7.1%
Colorado	-7.1%
Georgia	-6.7%
Tennessee	-6.5%

Driving rates show strong metro trends as well. Since 2002, the 100 largest metro areas have seen steadily declining rates of driving, and as they grow in size these rates actually drop more. For example, driving dipped 0.9% between 2005 and 2006 in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Washington, DC, and Dallas.

However, drivers getting out of their cars the fastest are in the metro areas of Austin, Indianapolis, Atlanta, Portland, ME, and Houston. Those metros where driving has jumped up since 2002 include New Orleans, Cape Coral, FL, Tucson, and Colorado Springs.

Metro Area *	Biggest Drop in VMT Per Capita (2002-2006)
Austin-Round Rock, TX	-12.3%
Indianapolis-Carmel, IN	-8.1%
Atlanta-Sandy Springs-Marietta, GA	-7.4%
Portland-South Portland-Biddeford, ME	-5.9%
Houston-Sugar Land-Baytown, TX	-5.2%

Metro Area	* Biggest Increase in VMT Per Capita (2002-2006)
New Orleans-Metairie-Kenner, LA	36.9%
Cape Coral-Ft. Myers, FL	23.9%
Tucson, AZ	17.3%
Colorado Springs, CO	16.8%
Palm Bay-Melbourne-Titusville, FL	15.8%
Milwaukee-Waukesha-West Allis, WI	15.8%

** To conduct the analysis for metropolitan areas, we are forced to limit our roadways to principal arterials because this is the only county-level data in HPMS. These roadways carried nearly 55 percent of all VMT in the nation in 2006; this is up from 52 percent in 1991. In addition, because these roads are predominantly part of the National Highway System or a state-managed roadway, these are the roads primarily supported by federal and states gas taxes. The remaining collector and local roads are primarily supported by local property taxes. Thus, this metro analysis covers the majority of total driving and the vast majority of driving on federal and state roads.*

“We are in a transformational time which presents us with unique opportunities to change federal and state policies to reflect the new realities of how we get around,” added Puentes. “We conducted this analysis because VMT patterns inform the solutions to the national transportation, environmental and energy challenges we face today.”

The report calls on Congress and state legislatures to raise the federal gas tax in the short-term and repeal the gas guzzler tax exemption for SUVs and light trucks to increase revenues. Policymakers must also consider other revenue streams that reflect changes in travel patterns, such as a carbon tax.

Other recommendations include creating new federal mechanisms to spark innovation in places that want to link disparate transportation, housing, energy and environmental policies to create better outcomes. New grants could be awarded to promote sustainable development patterns or reduce carbon emissions.

“These travel trends and their implications combined with heightened interest in rethinking how we pay for federal infrastructure creates a unique opportunity to put forth a bold new vision for our transportation policy,” stated Puentes.

About the Metropolitan Policy Program at Brookings

Created in 1996, the Metropolitan Policy Program (MPP) provides decision makers with cutting edge research and policy ideas for improving the health and prosperity of metropolitan areas including their component cities, suburbs, and rural areas. To learn more visit:

www.brookings.edu/metro.

About the Brookings Institution Metropolitan Infrastructure Initiative

“The Road ... Less Traveled” was prepared as part of MPP’s *Metropolitan Infrastructure Initiative*. Launched in 2008, the goal of the initiative is to develop timely, independent analysis, frame key debates, and offer policy recommendations to help leaders in the U.S. and abroad address key infrastructure challenges with specific emphasis on transportation. This work builds on a decade of independent and rigorous research and policy development. This and other publications, speeches, presentations, and commentary on transportation and infrastructure are available: <http://www.brookings.edu/topics/infrastructure.aspx>.

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