

UW-Madison: Study calls for curbing congestion by building fewer roads

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MADISON - Cities clamor for new development, with its promise of new housing or economic opportunities. Then comes the unwelcome side effect: congestion.

Popular new attractions or dozens of new apartments mean more travel in the neighborhood. To cope, cities typically require developers to add highway capacity for many new car trips, plus the parking those cars need, or pay a fee so the city can make those improvements in their stead.

The catch is, all those new roads might make things worse.

“When we add capacity, we induce more driving,” says Eric Sundquist, managing director of the State Smart Transportation Initiative (SSTI), a transportation think tank housed at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. “So there’s sort of a vicious cycle: We widen roads, people drive more; we widen roads, people drive more.”

SSTI and the UW-Madison-based Mayors Innovation Project recently released a new report arguing for a different approach that incentivizes diverse ways to travel to and from new developments. By funding public transportation, limiting parking and preserving the walkability of neighborhoods, Sundquist’s team argues, cities and states can reduce congestion better than if they only plan for cars.

The same solutions can help cities meet their policy goals, such as reduced emissions or more equitable access to services for residents.

“We look at the gap between policy goals on the one hand and the way decisions are being made that actually make things happen in the real world,” says Sundquist. “Often you have great policy goals, and then you have a bunch of rules of thumb that are still basically what was set in the '50s during the interstate era.”

The report is designed to help cities set requirements for developers on managing the transportation impacts of their projects, using a menu of measures designed to minimize the need for driving. The goal is to promote sound development, reduce regulatory burdens, keep cities livable and avoid gridlock. SSTI calls its approach “modern mitigation.”

“The idea is, let’s first try to reduce the amount of driving that we’re going to generate in the first place before we add supply, and only add supply if we absolutely need to,” says Sundquist.

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