

## **EQUAL TIME**

### **Tackle traffic, pollution separately**

**By JOEL SCHWARTZ**

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Conventional wisdom among most regulators, environmentalists and urban planners holds that reducing air pollution and relieving congestion requires major new initiatives to restrict suburban development and automobile use, and persuade people to live in high-density housing and take mass transit.

But such "smart growth" measures would do little to improve air quality, and would increase gridlock and prevent many Atlantans from choosing the lifestyle they desire. Atlanta can improve mobility and reduce smog at the same time, but only by discarding the current "social engineering" approach to regional planning and instead tackling smog and congestion head-on.

Even the Atlanta Regional Commission predicts transit investments will do little to decrease driving. ARC's 25-year Regional Transportation Plan puts \$20 billion, or 55 percent of funding, into mass transit. Yet ARC predicts only a few percent of people will shift from automobiles to transit -- with correspondingly tiny effects on air pollution. At the same time, road congestion will get worse, with motorists spending 7 percent more time driving than at present.

You know there's a problem when the agency producing the spending plan finds it will do little to achieve its stated goals. Instead, local authorities must realize that congestion and air pollution can and should be addressed separately. Here's how:

Auto pollution is declining by about 10 percent per year as older vehicles are scrapped and replaced by newer models that start out and stay cleaner as they age. As a result, overall vehicle emissions will decline more than 70 percent during the next 20 years, even after including projected growth in vehicle travel. Fleet turnover is reducing auto pollution more each year than \$20 billion in transit investments would during the next 25 years.

Ongoing fleet turnover means the long-term problem of auto-generated smog is essentially solved. Regulators should instead focus on measures that would improve air quality right now.

On-road pollution measurements with devices called remote sensors show a few percent of vehicles, so-called "gross polluters," account for most pollution, and

scheduled inspection programs do a poor job of addressing the problem. Remote sensors can identify these cars and regulators can require owners to make repairs and/or voluntarily scrap the vehicle for a cash incentive.

An aggressive remote sensing program could reduce auto pollution by an additional 5 to 15 percent within a year, but would cost only a few tens of millions of dollars -- about 0.2 percent of the cost of ARC's mass-transit plan.

Congestion and mobility are serious problems in Atlanta, and rapid population growth will only make matters worse. Since auto pollution has already been solved as a long-term problem, with or without transit investments or restrictions on suburbia, RTP funding should be reallocated to reflect the actual relative use of transit and autos. Transit dollars should also be focused on the poor and transit-dependent, rather than on car-owning suburbanites.

Current transportation policies bolster anti-suburban social agendas of many planners and environmentalists. It's time for Atlanta's local officials to start focusing on the real needs of their constituents.

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