

Too Much Traffic!

Who likes to be stuck in a car going nowhere? It's frustrating any time, and particularly when you've allowed exactly 20 minutes to get to your appointment a few miles away. Meanwhile, motorists are stopped in front of you, oblivious to your predicament.



How can we solve this for Brookhaven? “Make the road wider!” is a reflexive response. Unfortunately, buying the necessary property and paying for the paving is not deemed affordable by most local governments—which is probably lucky, since studies show widening roads in high-traffic areas generally offers only short-term, limited relief. The reason is that roads cross, and intersections by nature limit what relief can be offered as they arbitrate between motorists traveling at cross-purposes to each other.

Moreover, in Brookhaven, as in many high traffic areas, most of the cars belong to drivers who live elsewhere and are just passing through to or from, say, Buckhead; when congestion is relieved, it doesn't take long before more through-travelers discover the faster route—American drivers are efficient and versatile—and fill it until it once again slows to the speed of alternative routes. If we could only stop out-of-towners from cutting through Brookhaven, we could solve our congestion problems instantly—except that we drive through *other people's* neighborhoods. And to complete the picture, we should note that Brookhaven businesses welcome, and even depend upon, the exposure to future customers that drive-through traffic provides.

The good news is that “more cars” does not correlate directly with “more congestion.” Traffic analysis has many subtleties and it's important to consider not just how many cars use a road, such as Dresden or Peachtree, every day, but when do they come, where do they come from, what direction will they travel, and how efficient is the flow. The public result is a metric termed “Level of Service” (LOS), which is a grade assigned to each road segment after analysis, A through F, just like a school grade.

The meaning of each grade can be found here:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Level_of_service

Brookhaven's recently-completed Comprehensive Transportation Plan (CTP) includes engineering assessment of Brookhaven's streets and assigns LOS grades

to each street and each major intersection. It also projects an LOS for 2034. Peachtree and Dresden are currently rated LOS C and LOS D respectively, with both expected to be LOS D in 2034—not great, but serviceable and fairly typical for urban streets. N. Druid Hills, however, is already rated LOS F and will continue to hold that rating in 2034. In particular, the Peachtree/N. Druid Hills intersection is rated LOS F. In response, a high-priority recommendation of the CTP is:

- ***The proposed MARTA Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) Project located at the Brookhaven-Oglethorpe MARTA Station and its adjacent area.*** The CTP recommends the City undertake a project design as soon as possible to determine the desired traffic circulation system, ultimate improvement of the Peachtree Road intersections with Dresden Drive and North Druid Hills Drive, the potential improvement and extension of Apple Valley Way. MARTA is expected to request submittals from potential developers of the project in the Fall of 2014. It is recommended the City assess its opportunities to improve transportation mobility and access in the area along with the TOD process.

Since Peachtree Road is a state highway controlled by Georgia Department of Transportation, the design and funding path is larger than City Hall and takes time to negotiate. Nonetheless, improvements *are* available with the application of design and money. Re-design concepts for Brookhaven's section of Peachtree Road were proposed during the recent MARTA Charrette process, including a median design similar to the one implemented in Buckhead recently. The median design with traffic signal refinements has measurably improved traffic flow through Buckhead according to a recent study by Arcadis Engineering, as well as improved bike and pedestrian movement and safety. We can project that similar improvements are feasible in Brookhaven.

To summarize car congestion in Brookhaven between now and 2034:

- 1) Peachtree will get busier, but still provide an acceptable LOS (C to D)
- 2) Dresden will stay largely the same
- 3) N. Druid Hills is too congested to be acceptable now, and will remain so without turning-movement improvements
- 4) Road design and intersection changes are available and needed to improve efficiency; they are the responsibility of the City, working with GDOT

Cars, however, are only one piece of the traffic picture, particularly when we are talking about an urban center like central Brookhaven. This discussion would be incomplete without looking at all the choices.

How Will We Get Around Brookhaven?

Cars

Most of us own a car, a personal vehicle dedicated to getting us where we want to go. Our car is a wonderful thing, the height of convenience and efficiency, allowing each of us who own one to arrange our day and get to where we want to go irrespective, for the most part, of time, weather, distance or cargo (cargo includes passengers). It remains one of the great inventions of the 20th century and a huge turbocharge to our personal productivity and economic success.

We've recently become aware that the car has a few drawbacks, though. For one thing, a car costs a lot of money to buy—1/2 of a person's annual net income in many cases if it's bought outright. But most cars are bought via a car loan, and in addition, there are insurance, licensing, maintenance and operational costs. For many people, the ownership, insurance and operation of a car amounts to 1/6 of their net income every month. Add 1/3 of net income for housing costs, and that leaves 1/2 of a family's take-home pay for food, healthcare, clothing and all the other things in life.

We've also become aware that cars get in each other's way—that is, they create congestion and crashes. We're learning that we can't find enough public land and dollars to build our way out of car congestion. Congestion also means longer car trips and more cut-through traffic, and the amount of time spent in a car directly correlates to poor overall personal health.

Apart from congestion and general health concerns, there's the issue of crash-related deaths—about two a day in Georgia so far in 2015. This has been a price we're more than willing to pay for the benefits of driving, but it still deserves mention. And it doesn't include pedestrian, cyclist, or lung-disease related deaths due to car use.

Finally, we're finding significant environmental degradation due to car use—primarily air quality, water quality, and global greenhouse effect. These are long term effects that we choose to ignore, but they may have the most dramatic impact on our lifestyles in the long term.

Trains (and Buses)

The car is our clear No. 1 transportation choice, but its drawbacks have led people to look for other ways to get around. Mass transit is a method often pointed to in cities. It has very high initial cost, especially "heavy transit", and that limits the number of locations it can serve—you can't go just anywhere in Atlanta on mass transit. This limits its range, too—you can't go to Athens or Macon via train. Mass transit also limits the cargo you can take, and generally requires some other means of travel—by foot, for instance—to actually reach your destination ("the last mile" in planner parlance). This can expose you to climate conditions, and mass transit by definition will expose you directly to other people, which you may or may not like.

It's advantages are that it can move large numbers of people to specific locations without creating congestion; it's much safer than car transport; it has lower per person-mile operating costs than cars when used by enough people; it has relatively little adverse environmental impact per person-mile compared to cars; and it lowers commuters' stress levels and improves health. In Brookhaven, we're lucky to have a mass transit station in our center. It is the surest and lowest-cost way to get to the airport, and if one works in one of the employment centers it serves, it is a reliable way to get to work on time.

Bikes

According to Steve Jobs, the bicycle is the most efficient transportation ever invented in terms of kilocalories used to move a person from point A to point B. ("A computer," declared Mr. Jobs, "Is a bicycle for the mind!") A basic bicycle is inexpensive. Bike riding also promotes individual health without degrading air quality. What are the drawbacks? For most people, bicycling range is limited to about 3 miles, especially in hilly areas--and Atlanta is hilly. Bicycles have limited cargo-carrying ability, and cold, wind, rain and heat can dissuade people from choosing to bike. The number one limitation for most people, though, is fear of sharing the roadway with cars. When protected bikeways are available, a recent Minnesota study shows the percentage of people willing to use a bike for transportation jumps from 15% to 60%.

Feet

Walking is something everyone in reasonably good health can do at absolutely no startup or operational expense—everyone owns shoes. It is healthy for us personally and has no measurable adverse environmental impact. Congestion isn't a problem today. So why doesn't everyone walk? The most serious limitations for walking are speed and range—at 3 mi./hour, most people draw the line at 1-1/2 miles (1/2 hour) as a transportation range. From a walk-to-ride mass transit standpoint, most studies have found that a 1/2 mile radius from the mass transit station is the cut-off point for pedestrian access. Ironically, people will walk twice as far for recreation—perhaps because time is not a critical factor in that pursuit. Cargo can be a problem with walking, as can safety from cars and, in some locations, lurkers. In fact, research shows that providing people safe and interesting pathways (ie. generally sidewalks) has a major effect on how many people will walk as a means of transportation.

Summary Chart: Transportation Choices

	Initial Cost	Operating Cost	Safety	Comfort	Cargo	Range
Car	high	high	risky	high	lots	unlimited
Train	high	moderate	safe	moderate	limited	limited destinations
Bike	low	low	risky	low	low	3 mi.
Feet	none	none	moderate	low	low	1.5 mi.

How Will We Get Around Brookhaven?

This review of transportation options doesn't pretend to identify a "best method" for anyone. We love our cars because they have many advantages, and car travel will remain king for the foreseeable future. Cars have their drawbacks, however, and we're learning that relying exclusively on the car as our transportation means is not good for our health or time management, especially as car congestion becomes a more salient part of the experience.

In Brookhaven, we're lucky to have a mass transit station and lucky to have options. *The key to livability is to have transportation choices.* We CAN have viable mass transit, biking and walking choices as long as we plan and build wisely. It's to every citizen's benefit, because each person that chooses to make a trip via non-car means leaves the road less congested for those consigned to cars. The key is planning cooperatively and building wisely.

We can't promise those consigned to cars a congestion-free path to where they want to go; we can promise everyone, however, CHOICES in how they get from here-to-there. As we prepare for changes in central Brookhaven, we can improve mobility and safety for everyone through smart planning that includes all transportation types.