

## Region's Ozone Lesson Lies South

Pollution Already Has Cost Atlanta Federal Funds for Roads

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In Atlanta and its suburbs, summer no longer means fresh lemonade and soft breezes on porch swings. Instead, it's "smog season" in a place where drivers must pay more for cleaner gas, a regional board can block traffic magnets like new shopping malls, and television ads show sobbing motorists stuck in jams.

That's what happens when a region's air pollution becomes so unhealthy that the federal government refuses to spend more money to build roads.

And the Washington region may be next.

If planners don't find quicker ways to reduce the noxious fumes spewing from local tailpipes in the next 2 1/2 years, the region could become only the second major metropolitan area, after Atlanta, to lose all federal transportation money for new construction.

"This is exactly where Atlanta was in about 1996" before it lost federal road-building money, said Michael Replogle, federal transportation director of Environmental Defense.

Officials here are looking south for ideas.

"The phone lines are burning down to Atlanta," Metro General Manager Richard A. White told his board of directors last week.

Both Washington and Atlanta are struggling with nitrogen oxides that combine in sunlight with another byproduct of vehicle exhaust to form unhealthy levels of ground-level ozone.

Cleaner fuels and newer cars with more effective emissions controls are improving Washington's air -- just not fast enough to meet federal ozone standards by a 2005 deadline. The Clean Air Act, which set those standards, forced regions to consider the effects on ozone before building new roads.

Atlanta's loss of federal road money shook up every sector of the community. Business leaders feared that traffic congestion and dirty air would sour Atlanta's "New South" economy. Health advocates and environmentalists worried about frequent "red alert" days. Politicians felt pressured to find solutions. Together, they agreed to make dramatic changes, but the results have been moderate.

"Transportation is a very big boat that is slow to turn," said Jeff Rader, formerly of the city's Chamber of Commerce.

"The progress is incremental at best," added Wesley Woolf, Atlanta director for the Southern Environmental Law Center.

The federal government pulled the plug on Atlanta's annual road-building allocation of \$153 million from 1998 until July 2000. Although the region could spend money on safety and repair work, it could not add roads or highway lanes.

"It wasn't a situation where the bulldozers stopped rolling," said Barbara McCann, of the Surface Transportation Policy Project. But, she said, "If it had gone on any longer, more and more of the road projects would have been affected."

Federal dollars were shifted away from roads and bridges to mass transit.

"It's been a boon rather than a bust for us," said Steen Miles, a spokeswoman for the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority, which runs a subway and bus system less than half the size of Metro.

In addition to buying cleaner-burning buses, the region plans to pour \$7 billion into mass transit -- adding bus routes and its first commuter rail service, among other things. Last month, Gov. Roy E. Barnes (D) proposed spending billions more on transit -- a radical departure for the road-friendly state.

Officials also improved sidewalks, required gas stations to supply the slightly more expensive but less-polluting low-sulfur gas during summer and required more frequent vehicle emissions tests.

Universities and government, business and environmental groups established the Clean Air Campaign, which organizes ride-share programs, works with employers to offer telecommuting and transit benefits, and uses a \$9 million marketing budget to try to change behavior. One TV ad shows an elderly man with a walker cruising past a driver fuming in traffic.

"What really motivates people in Atlanta more than air quality is traffic congestion," said Ron Methier, of the Georgia Environmental Protection Division.

The business community, led by the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, pushed for a new regional transportation authority to replace a system where individual projects competed for state money in a more haphazard way.

The authority has vast powers to own and operate transit systems and approve the state's transportation spending. Most importantly, it has final say over any development project that would generate significant traffic.

"The problem in Atlanta, and maybe in Washington, was that jurisdictions still have a great deal of influence," said Rader, who worked with the regional authority and is now with the Greater Atlanta Home Builders Association. "In many cases, jurisdictional parochialism undermines regional transportation and land-use strategies."

By last July, the state's changes, combined with its heavy spending on mass transit, were enough to persuade the federal government to resume the flow of dollars for road and bridge projects.

But Atlanta's pollution problems are far from over. Environmental groups have sued state and federal transportation planning agencies, arguing that they can't possibly pay for promised increases in transit and that many of the assumptions are flawed.

The loss of federal money "has swayed policymakers into thinking about [transportation] and planning differently," said Woolf, the environmental groups' attorney on the suit. "But the plans on paper are in significant part fictional."

Despite the regional transportation authority's power to make unpopular choices to help the entire region, critics say it has been stymied by the same old local politics. "Most of the counties still have a 'manifest destiny' approach to growth," said David Goldberg, editorial writer for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

As they look for lessons in Atlanta, officials here recognize important differences between the two regions. Pollution here is less extreme, and Washington's suburbs are dwarfed by Atlanta's sprawl.

This area offers far more alternatives to driving -- two commuter railroads, extensive bus service and the

nation's second-busiest subway. Atlanta's subway serves just two of the region's 13 counties. When the pollution crisis hit, only one county had bus service to the city. As a result, Atlanta motorists drive farther than Washingtonians, and the city's faster sprawl means that's likely to continue.

Still, in the Washington region, the prospect of losing even one federal dollar when the transportation network is stretched to its limits makes officials nervous.

On Wednesday, the regional Transportation Planning Board created a task force to come up with solutions and head off what it considers a looming crisis. Those measures, such as buying Metrobuses that use cleaner fuel and replacing older taxis, will likely cost the District, Maryland and Virginia in the tens of millions while still proving difficult to reduce emissions enough, one transportation expert said.

Maryland and District officials say no major construction projects would immediately be jeopardized. In Virginia, though, the air-quality problems will surely delay the widening of Route 28 in the clogged Dulles corridor and the conversion of seven intersections to stoplight-free interchanges, state officials say.

Metro says projects already underway, including the Blue Line extension to Largo, the New York Avenue Station on the Red Line and rail to Dulles International Airport, are safe. But a pollution crisis could block funds for other plans, including rail over the new Woodrow Wilson Bridge, new track through downtown Washington and plans to expand parking at suburban Metro stations.

Ronald Kirby, transportation planning director for the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments, said that local officials know they must act quickly.

"The experience of Atlanta shows it doesn't help to be thrashing around and fighting over whether the problem is real or who's at fault," Kirby said. "Almost everyone is now saying 'Okay, we have to deal with the problem.'"

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