

Traffic and Transportation by Tom Barwin

When sitting in gridlock, you may recall seeing pictures of those futurist mid-20th century renderings showing cars flying. As we know, fortunately or unfortunately, flying cars have never taken off.

Although low-flying drones may have some interesting implications in terms of taking some pressures off of our streets, in terms of possibly delivering local goods, they will likely not be the panacea to eliminate traffic congestion in America's cities.

In lieu of flying cars or our sky's being occupied by large numbers of drones, transportation planners in most big metro-regions around the world are working feverishly on increasing the number of options available for our ever increasing and highly mobile population.

Our basic transportation system of airplanes, trains, subways, light rail, taxis, Uber cars, busses, shuttles, and boats is increasingly being supplemented by bicycle trails and other local innovations that make sense.

Here in Sarasota, as in most communities, the climate controlled, stereophonic, car remains king.

As more and more people have chosen Florida as home, the state has swelled to over 20 million residents, becoming the third most populated state in the country.

Moving more and more people in cars is challenging considering that many of the roads laid out decades ago are seriously limited in terms of the potential to expand.

Today it would be very difficult and prohibitively expensive to add traffic lanes to many of our main coastal roads. Property acquisition and business relocation costs would be enormous. So what can we do, what should we do?

Within the City of Sarasota, a number of short and longer range transportation initiatives are underway.

Like much of Florida, we are being challenged to address the somewhat unique difficulty of moving more and more vehicles during peak season and peak hours of peak season, when seasonal residents and visitors return. For 75% or more of the time our roads have good capacity and may even appear to be oversized, but during peak season it's a different story. It's akin to whether or not to size the year-around mall parking lot for Christmas shopping the day after Thanksgiving.

In the weeks ahead you will begin to see the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) making improvements to move traffic more efficiently on US 41 between Fruitville and Gulf Stream. A dedicated right turn lane on northbound US 41 at Fruitville is being added as well as a median divider from Fruitville to Gulf Stream. Both modifications should help move traffic a bit more efficiently on and off of Lido and Longboat Keys.

Sarasota has also just received a grant to review and improve the timing of traffic control lights within the city to make them as efficient as possible through the high tech, Sarasota and Manatee County traffic management center located in Bradenton.

Within the City of Sarasota, we have an important and priority sidebar issue to moving traffic. That is taking steps to make sure the more densely populated areas of the city, including the downtown and waterfront districts, are safe and comfortable for pedestrians. Pedestrian safety is also king.

The 11 major roundabouts being planned along US 41 are advancing and were conceived to move traffic in a steady yet safer fashion, once drivers adapt to them. The first two roundabouts will be implemented on US 41 on 10th and 14th in 2017 and 2018.

To take some of the pressure off the roads from local traffic the city has miles and miles of multi-use-recreational trails (MURT) and bike paths on the drawing board to implement as funds become available. Within the next few years, we are hopeful the wonderful Legacy Bike Trail which runs all the way to Venice will connect to downtown Sarasota opening the connection to Lido and Longboat Keys, as well as Northport.

We in the City are also looking forward to working on the Longboat Key inspired mainland to islands traffic study which was recently approved for funding by the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO).

The city is also planning on testing a downtown connector this winter to experiment with small but flexible downtown shuttles using Uber-like app technology. And conversations about water taxi options to St. Armands and perhaps Longboat Key from the mainland are picking up momentum. We are also encouraging people to consider living as close to work as possible, when possible, to also help reduce traffic.

Longer range, we are pursuing a dialogue with local leaders on how to advance transit options between downtown Bradenton and downtown Sarasota. This option of creating a transit backbone will not only help connect area college students to the 4 universities on the US 41 corridor, it would also connect affordable housing to our employment centers, while moving people without further congesting our roads with more cars.

This is a big and important challenge. We look forward to working with Longboat Key and others to do all we can reasonably do to address this challenge in a smart and cost effective way using as many of the traditional tools and modern new innovative technology which continues to come online.

As always we welcome your ideas at Thomas.barwin@sarasotagov.com