

Don't Blame the Trucks for I-95 Congestion: Cameron on Transportation

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When it comes to our horrendous traffic, especially on I-95, everybody wants to find blame with someone other than themselves. “Who are these people and why are they driving now, on “my” road?” they ask.

The easiest scapegoats are trucks: those behemoths that lumber along in the right and center lanes (because they are not allowed to drive in the left-hand lane). But I suggest that it’s not trucks that are responsible for our traffic. It’s the rest of us in our single-occupancy vehicles (SOVs). According to the CDOT, almost 80 percent of commuting motorists drive alone.

First off, realize that trucks are high occupancy vehicles. They're filled with the stuff that we want to buy at our grocery and big box stores. We put them on the road by our very consumption patterns.

Should they be driving in rush hour? Probably not, nor do they want to be. It's highly inefficient. But they're there because the stores tell them that's when they want their goods delivered, i.e. in business hours.

Editor's note: When Jim Cameron moved his transportation column from Acorn Newspapers (including the Darien Times) to Hearst Newspapers (including the Darien News), Hearst's rule was that he couldn't reprint it in a publication until two weeks later. We decided then not to run the column, but we've just changed our mind, and we'll catch up with several columns this week. Here's the first in a while.

The New York City Department of Transportation has run experiments on off-hour truck delivery times and had great success. The 2009 trial was run in cooperation with Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and had trucks move from daytime deliveries of goods to evenings and overnights.

Manhattan averages 100,000 truck deliveries a day, so just imagine what shifting even a few of those trucks to less congested hours would do. Merchants were happy because deliveries weren't held up by traffic. The truckers liked it for the same reason, plus they got fewer parking tickets and were more productive, making more deliveries per shift.

Why can't we do the same thing here in Connecticut? Most of our big-box stores are open extended hours, so why not require or incentivize them to have their trucks deliver overnight, outside of rush hour?

Trucks have to drive on the interstates because they are banned from most local roads. Yet SOV drivers treat I-95 like a short-cut from one side of town to the other. It's an inter-state highway, folks. Yet the average distance driven on I95 is just 11 miles. Truckers must drive hundreds of miles each day.

If we were smart enough to "value price" our highways with tolls, local traffic wouldn't be clogging our interstates to only go a few exits and the long-distance drivers, cars and trucks, would have a fast, albeit a bit more expensive, ride. To truckers, time is money, so they'll end up saving both.

Do some truckers drive too fast? Sure. But so do a lot of SOVs. When traffic permits, try driving the speed limit on I-95 and watch everyone passing you. How safe is that? And why aren't those speed limits enforced?

We absolutely need better inspection of all trucks entering and driving through our state. The weight and inspection stations at our borders should be open 24 x 7 and would easily pay for themselves with the fines they'd collect.

But remember: Truckers drive for a living. They are licensed, trained professionals, held to far higher standards than the average passenger car driver. And because of their experience, I think they are, on average, much better drivers. When's the last time you saw a trucker trying to juggle a smart-phone and a Frappuccino like some foolish commuters do?

Folks, I am hardly a lobbyist for the trucking industry and am just as guilty as the rest of us for seeking unfettered access to "my" interstates. But it's just not fair for us to blame anyone but ourselves for the traffic we create. It's the SOVers, not the truckers, who make the traffic problems we endure.

Don't believe me? Next time you're crawling bumper-to-bumper on I-95, just count the number of SOVs and tally the total of trucks and you decide who's creating all this traffic.

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