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With Sparse Highway Traffic, Speed Pedals Get Closer to the Metal: Cameron on Transportation

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I'll admit it: I love driving fast. I've even been known to drive faster than 55 mph on I-95, but who hasn't? (And I've never been given a ticket).

When the road's not crawling along bumper-to-bumper at rush hour, driving the speed limit almost seems unsafe, you're getting passed so often.

A couple of years ago I had a reporter "ride along" on I-95 with a state trooper. It was a blast, going from fender-bender to catching cell phone users, the lights and siren wailing. But at one point as we cruised along with traffic (in our unmarked car) we were doing about 70 mph just like all the other cars around us.

“Aren’t we all breaking the speed limit,” I asked the trooper. “How do you decide who to pull over?” He thought for a second, noticing I was transcribing his words to paper, and said “I look for the driver who’s likely to cause an accident — the guy who’s weaving or not using his signals.”

I suddenly felt I’d been given a green light to go 70 mph, as long as I did it safely.

Now, in the midst of this pandemic, people are taking that ‘permission’ too far, treating the near-empty highways like a drag strip.

The CDOT monitors traffic at 39 locations across the state. And they have a neat online app showing real-time data that tells the tale of diminished traffic.

Take I-95 in Norwalk for example. Last year the daily average was 147,000 vehicles. Last week saw 79,000. Another monitoring station in Newtown on I-84 went from 77,000 a day to 35,000.

According to state police, traffic stops are down 50% from last year, so ticketing is down also. But so too is the accident rate — by about one third.

Driving in to New York City (why?), check your Waze app or Google Maps and you’ll see all the roads are “clean and green” — no delays. But highway speeds are up, way up. And Big Apple speed cameras have issued 12% more tickets in recent weeks.

Driving interstate has never been faster. So fast that some are combing the empty asphalt with excessive speeds to break the record for the fastest cross-country trip by car — the famous Cannonball Run.

It was Edwin George “Cannon Ball” Baker who made the first N.Y. to L.A. drive in 1915, covering the distance in 11 days and seven hours.

But last week several challengers in this unauthorized road race claimed new records: just under 27 hours!

That means they averaged over 100 mph on the almost 3000 mile trip. There’s no prize aside from bragging rights but state troopers across the country are warning would-be drivers not to risk their lives or others’ with such a stunt.

In California the Highway Patrol recently issued 534 speeding tickets in just 10 days, many of them for speeds over 100 mph. That’s dangerous.

I’ve driven the maximum 80 mph in Utah and I gotta tell you — at those speeds things happen way too fast for you to be able to react.

I know we’re all getting cabin fever and long for the open road. But I hope we haven’t gone this far to stay healthy only to do something stupid like driving 100 mph on our interstates.

Jim Cameron has been a Darien resident for more than 25 years. He is the founder of the [Commuter Action Group](#), sits on the [Merritt Parkway Conservancy](#) board and also serves on the Darien RTM and as program director for Darien TV79. The opinions expressed in this column, republished with permission of Hearst CT Media, are only his own. You can reach him at CommuterActionGroup@gmail.com.