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Don't wait for a traffic miracle; try some solutions
Editorial

On good days, driving around the city of Atlanta during rush hour is merely irritating. On bad days, the experience is an incubator for road rage. On occasion — an example being last month's collision of a poultry convention and a big-name motivational seminar with the morning commute — it's simply hellish.

The daily trials reinforce the idea that Atlanta's traffic congestion is incurable. But it's certainly not unassailable. Nibbling at the edges of the problem is more productive than just waiting years for elected officials to come together on an effective and extensive regional mass transit system.

There are ways to make the daily commute less onerous, and Atlanta should explore them. None are necessarily expensive, and all could be adopted quickly.

- Major venues (the Georgia World Congress Center and Philips Arena, for example) need to be smarter about scheduling. It's not a good idea to invite big crowds to downtown Atlanta at rush hour, as was done on Jan. 25. The result was gridlock. If possible, conventions should start and end before or after the rush, not during.

The convention and meeting business is an important economic contributor to Atlanta, and care should be taken not to discourage it. But even that business would benefit (Atlanta would be a more attractive destination, for one thing) if moving around downtown, Midtown or Buckhead were easier.

- More effective restrictions on truck traffic are needed.

Currently, only a relatively small section of downtown Atlanta is barred to big trucks with trailers passing through during the day. There and elsewhere, the lone limitation on truck deliveries and pickups in the city is that they must be made between 7 a.m. and 9 p.m. That might not be a problem but for the fact it's not uncommon for parked delivery trucks — and sometimes buses — to block street lanes at the worst times of day. Even more absurdly, law enforcement officers are in the habit of backing up car and bus traffic during the morning or evening commutes to allow large delivery and construction trucks to enter or leave city streets.

Obviously, Atlanta couldn't function without truck deliveries, or grow without the presence of construction traffic. But adjusting trucking hours to avoid conflict with the heaviest periods of commuter traffic makes sense. Fortunately for motorists, Atlanta Councilwoman Clair Muller, chairwoman of the council's transportation committee, is considering legislation to do just that.

"You shouldn't be driving down the street at 8:30 [a.m.] and be blocked by five delivery trucks," she correctly suggests.

- More thoughtful coordination of lane closings for construction of office towers, condos,

shopping centers and the like would help.

The city's Department of Public Works grants permits to developers to close street lanes. That creates bottlenecks that grow exponentially worse when construction occurs simultaneously on projects in the same vicinity. The city needs to work harder to minimize the disruption. Several downtown construction or renovation projects are in the works currently; all of them have blocked one or more lanes of traffic.

- More help for motorists trying to find their way out of Buckhead, Midtown or downtown is needed. Strangers — and even infrequent visitors — are handicapped by the scarcity of prominent signs or message boards directing them out of congested areas.
- Employers should consider alternative work hours or telecommuting for their employees. The former option helped contain traffic problems during the 1996 Olympic Games; Atlanta businesses were encouraged to start the workday earlier or later than normal.

Atlanta was not designed for today's traffic. On an average day, for example, about 226,000 vehicles are wheeled into a downtown area defined by a perimeter just a mile from the intersection of Peachtree Street and Andrew Young International Boulevard. At the same time, the drivers of an additional 57,000 vehicles are looking for a way out of that constricted section of downtown, and 27,000 other cars, buses or trucks are circulating within it.

Buckhead and Midtown struggle against heavy traffic volume as well.

Finding a long-term solution to congestion, of course, is "not rocket science," according to Morris Dillard, a former MARTA executive who was in charge of transportation, among other things, for the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games. "You have to do something about the number of vehicles."

But in the meantime, if the city can't do anything about the number of vehicles, it needs to reduce the number of self-induced traffic headaches.

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