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Driving some to lifestyle changes

Road projects propel commuters to share, take MARTA, even rent downtown.
Ariel Hart

Kathie Daniel and her husband still have their house in Newnan, but she isn't there much. About six weeks ago, she rented an apartment in Midtown to spend four days a week. It's not about her marriage, which she said is "wonderful," or the roomy house and yard she still enjoys when she can.

It's the traffic.

Over the past two years, Daniel watched a barely tolerable 41-mile one-way commute to her job in Atlanta grow from about 50 minutes to an hour and 20 minutes, sometimes an hour and 45 minutes.

The legal secretary said daily congestion was bad enough, but Midtown streets always seemed to be closed or under construction.

"Practically every surface street in the area looks like it's been dug up or bombed out," Daniel said. Still, she persevered, until six weeks ago.

"It got to a point where I thought I was going to have to decide between my career and my home," Daniel said.

Announcements of Downtown Connector work pushed her over the edge. The state Department of Transportation is rebuilding the 14th Street Bridge over the Downtown Connector, and the bridge will probably shut down completely in May.

In a related project, the DOT is scheduled to start repaving I-75/I-85 from University Avenue to 10th Street, an eight-month project, as soon as crews get a rain-free weekend.

The repaving should mostly affect weekend drivers, but the 14th Street Bridge project has already hit Midtown commuters square in the face, closing Techwood Drive completely from 16th Street to 10th Street.

Daniel's studio apartment costs nearly \$1,000 a month, including parking, but she said the relief is worth it.

"It's liberating," she said.

And, while she used to spend about \$60 a week in gas, she has filled her tank only once in the past month and a half.

Another close-in resident is DOT spokeswoman Crystal Paulk-Buchanan.

"There are sacrifices so many people are making because of the congestion issues, and those sacrifices should not be taken lightly," Paulk-Buchanan said. "But it's a good thing for people to say, 'What's the best thing for me?' "

For herself, "my husband and I chose to move into a transitional neighborhood so we would not have to deal with our commute," Paulk-Buchanan said.

Growing numbers of Midtowners are apparently switching to greener commutes such as MARTA, car-pooling or teleworking, Paulk-Buchanan said. "In making it better for themselves, they're making it better for everyone else."

According to the Clean Air Campaign, in the weeks after Techwood closed, the number of Midtown commuters registering for a rewards program to leave their solo cars went up by a third.

The Midtown Alliance, a self-taxing business district, collects anecdotes such as Daniel's to publicize commute alternatives, said Dan Hourigan, program director for the alliance's transportation arm.

Two more of his success stories are Melissa Rose and Linda Autrey. Rose joined the Clean Air Campaign's Cash for Commuters program and is making \$3 a day for turning her solo drive into a car pool. She said she'd been trying to find a car-pool partner from her area in Smyrna but couldn't — until Techwood closed.

"Even if you're late in the morning, for me [the HOV lane is] a lot less stressful because you're moving, not just sitting in traffic," Rose said.

Autrey has the same reaction to her new ride on MARTA from the Doraville station, adding that "Nobody has cursed and sworn at me on the way to work because I got in their way."

Not everyone in Midtown would make material for alternative commute boosters. Paul Brown, a Georgia Tech student who uses the interstates most days to get to his job, said the traffic he sees isn't bad enough to make him look beyond his car.

Daniel said she thinks everyone should get on the bandwagon if they can.

She recalls that a colleague at the King & Spalding law firm asked her about her commute the other day.

"I said, 'Yeah, there's construction by my building. I had to step over a hose on the sidewalk, it was just brutal.' "

THE STORY SO FAR

> Previously: The DOT has contracted to rebuild the 14th Street Bridge and ramps over I-75/I-85. Crews narrowed Williams Street to one lane and in February closed Techwood Drive from 16th Street to 10th Street.

> The latest: The DOT has greenlighted a \$27.7 million contract to start repaving the Downtown Connector from University Avenue to 10th Street, working most weekends for eight months. Crews intend to start work, and lane closures, the first weekend the weather is clear.

> What's next: Probably in mid- to late May, the 14th Street Bridge will close for about a year and a half.