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Travel Survey to Dissect Region

Officials Hope Commuters' Habits Will Help Guide Transportation Planning

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Regional officials have launched the first major household travel survey in a decade to learn more about what improvements could best address chronic traffic congestion.

Planners hardly need another study to tell them traffic is bad. But the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments' Transportation Planning Board said the new survey, announced at its January meeting, is designed to drill more deeply into the travel habits of 10,000 randomly selected households. Officials hope to gain insights that will help guide spending on roads and mass transit.

Traffic has not merely worsened in the past 10 years; patterns of congestion have changed significantly, said survey project manager Robert Griffiths. As suburban economic hubs such as Tysons Corner continue to grow, the traditional linear commute from suburban home to office in the District is no longer the singular concern of planners.

"We need to know how people are responding to these changes," Griffiths said.

Like the Nielsen families that help determine television ratings, survey households will be asked to keep a record of all trips -- to work, school, Little League, coffee, the bank and so on -- for a 24-hour period. Planners are especially interested in the prevalence of "trip substitution," the use of instruments such as Internet banking and online shopping in place of traditional errands behind the wheel.

In recognition of the region's sprawling growth, the survey also will cast a wider net, Griffiths said, venturing as far as the Baltimore suburbs and Jefferson County, W.Va.

The Transportation Planning Board has commissioned NuStats, an Austin transportation research company, to survey 800 to 900 households a month over the next year. A preliminary report is expected by June 2008.

The Council of Governments' last major travel study, completed in 1997, foreshadowed trends that are still at the center of the region's mobility problems. Carpool use decreased by 14 percent between 1993 and 1996, while the number of people driving alone to work rose 6 percent, trends that are continuing, Griffiths said.

Past local and national surveys have documented the increasing complexity of working lives. As more women entered the workplace over the past 30 years, both parents began to balance their regular commutes with school pickups and drop-offs, sports events and other extra trips.

Other surveys have documented the "Starbucks effect." In 2005, a travel analyst used U.S. Department of Transportation household studies to suggest that the yearning for high-end coffee was adding miles to the

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morning rush hour. Comparing the 1995 and 2001 DOT surveys, Nancy McGuckin found that an additional 1.6 million people added personal errands to their commutes and that most of the growth in errands occurred during the morning rush.

A closer look at the data showed that although younger men were sharing more of the domestic errands, older men were heading for coffee and bagels.

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