



Frightening future for Staten Island traffic

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STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- If you think traffic is bad now, wait a few years.

With some forecasts calling for population growth of 35 percent in the next two decades, Island newcomers will be taking to the roads in droves, and that's not even counting teens who will be passing their road tests and getting behind the wheel for the first time.

"There's going to be more traffic every time there's a new driver," said Ken Petrizzi of Westerleigh, an instructor with AAAA Driving School in Eltingville, who estimated a good 300 students will pass through his company's Drivers Ed classes every 16 weeks, not counting students who sign up for private lessons.

"There will be a lot more drivers," Petrizzi said. "It's too congested now."

Brooklyn resident Melissa Panebianco just bought a house in West Brighton and plans to get a new car. A first-time driver at age 29, she passed her road test last month in preparation for her move to a borough where having a car is a necessity, and taking the bus to her job in Brooklyn would tack hours onto her commute.

In Richmond County where the car is king, just over 263,600 cars are registered --12,700 more than in Manhattan, according to 2008 DMV statistics. That's in a borough with 487,400 people and 174,000 households, which breaks down to roughly one-and-a-half cars per average three-person household.

And more cars are on the way. There are already roughly more than 10 percent more vehicles registered to Staten Islanders last year than a decade ago, and with forecasts for continued population growth in the years to come, the borough's already-clogged and limited road network is going to feel the strain more than ever.

In just the past 12 months, more than 13,200 new drivers were licensed at the Staten Island office of the DMV, between new permit holders and those who switched their license over from another state, according to DMV records. That figure includes residents from elsewhere in the city and the state who chose to visit the Staten Island branch though they don't reside here.

That thought is enough to keep Jonathan Peters awake at night. The College of Staten Island professor and transportation expert is a former professional forecaster who now teaches his students how to make accurate projections based on long-term patterns.

Peters believes the future of Staten Island's roads is bleak unless a "radically different" approach is undertaken, and soon.

"Picture Victory Boulevard with 35 percent more cars on it," he said. "Picture the Staten Island Expressway with 35 percent more cars."

Of all the things he wonders about, he said, "this is one of the ones that haunts me. This is the reality we're heading toward, and we have to be prepared."

Peters based his own projections for traffic in the year 2030 on the borough's pattern of continuous growth, though the current economic decline has slowed the momentum somewhat.

To alleviate the crunch of new drivers who will be taking to the borough's fixed road network in future years, Peters believes the city should focus on "transit-oriented development," where housing is added to areas with a variety of transit options. One such example would be building up housing density along the North Shore, where plans are in the works to restore transit service along the North Shore Rail line.

It's still unclear how the city will choose to develop large swaths of the West Shore, and suburban, car-centric developments there would push the existing infrastructure to the limit, he said.

"I'm very, very concerned about the population growth," he said. "If I felt we had a system in place to deal with the growth, I'd be a lot less nervous. But there seems to be denial."

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