



Population boom clogs Staten Island roads

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In Dongan Hills, near Reid Avenue, traffic backs up on Hylan Boulevard, one of the borough's most heavily traveled roadways. STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. --- A snapshot of Staten Island's population growth found one noticeable downside: Many more cars are jamming borough roads.

As new residents arrive from Brooklyn and other boroughs in search of more space and a better price, those two- and three-car families aren't packing up like they have in recent years.

The numbers tell a story of roads already at their breaking point.

UP 10% in 10 YEARS

The past decade has seen over 10 percent more vehicles registered here -- moving in the opposite direction of the city as a whole, which has seen nearly 5 percent fewer vehicle registrations over that same period, according to DMV records.

The 491,730 residents who called the Island home in 2009 registered 263,571 vehicles here last year. That's more vehicles than were registered in Manhattan or the Bronx, and just about doubles residents-to-motor vehicle ratio of any borough.

Looking forward to 2030, imagine a population anywhere between 600,000 and 620,000. That's the guess of Professor Jonathan Peters, an economist and transportation expert at the College of Staten Island. For argument's sake, figure the population grows 25 percent between now and then. Of those new residents, it's likely some 60 percent of them will be getting into cars, Peters said.

"Unless we do something in terms of transit, it's going to load onto the street in a proportional rate, meaning people are going to get up and drive. So the expectation is it's going to add to congestion rather significantly."

Outdated roads, roads to nowhere, and poor pavement conditions already plague the borough's 2,395 miles of roadway. "Certainly, as the vehicle population grows, it would add a burden on roads that seem only marginally able to keep up with traffic volumes as they exist today," said Robert Sinclair of AAA New York.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg created the Staten Island Transportation and Traffic Task Force to address the borough's traffic mess in 2006.

The panel's report spurred a number of improvements, including center lanes and left turn signals at problem intersections, "smart" traffic lights, an HOV and bus lane along the Staten Island Expressway and an expansion of park-and-ride lots.

But most officials here agree the task force has a lot more work to do -- and they'll need to meet more often to do it. The group met about every three months after it was formed, up until February 2008. After more than a year lapse, its last meeting was June 2009.

City Hall could also step in by fixing an area in which the Island has always been given short shrift: Public transportation. Residents in other boroughs with more transit services can always opt to take a train when the road network gets too clogged.

But on the Island, where buses are the only option, aside from the Staten Island Railway, "if the congestion gets worse, the cars slow down, but so do the buses," Peters said.

"Traffic is not good now. Transit is not good now. Are we making the right plans for the future?" he asked.

Peters believes the city's projections for population growth are too low to prepare for the crush of new residents that could call the Island home.

But, he says, if there's a will, and a budget to make it happen, there are opportunities to run limited-stop buses, for example, on Richmond Avenue, where the road is wide enough to give buses room to speed up.

The bottom line is, changes have to be made soon to prepare for the growth, before it's too late. "Use what you have," Peters said of tweaking existing infrastructure to speed travel times. "But we're also going to have to invest in some key improvements, because the capacity isn't going to be there."

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