

Highway congestion is easing up: MTO

By IRENE GENTLE
The Champion

It may look bad out there, but according to the Ontario Ministry of Transportation (MTO), things have gotten better.

This area may boast some of the busiest highway systems in the world, but congestion has been eased by the implementation of the COMPASS system of traffic management, said the MTO's head of advanced traffic management Phil Masters.

He appeared before the Region's planning and public works committee June 14. "The highway network is a vital component of economic prosperity and highway expansion opportunities are limited," said Mr. Masters. "This is not a problem we're going to build our way out of."

One reason is the issue of latent demand. Instead of spreading out existing traffic, adding new lanes to old highways would likely just encourage more drivers.

"It would be filled almost immediately," said Mr. Masters.

Instead, COMPASS wields a combination of congestion-fighting weapons, starting with simple traffic monitoring. That's achieved with data-gathering loops placed under the asphalt. They feed traffic information back to a central MTO computer.

Cameras have also been placed roughly one kilometre apart throughout much of the provincial highway system, to give MTO officials a picture of any trouble spots.

"They can determine whether in fact there is an incident there," said Mr. Masters. "Is it a collision, are there a number of vehicles involved, is there a fire, are there injured parties?"

That information is then fed to any responding rescue vehicles.

"We get in direct contact with emergency services and give them very specific details on the incident," he said.

The cameras help spot anything from collisions to stalled cars to debris on the highway.

All serve to slow things down. But fast, precise monitoring can help speed it up again.

According to Mr. Masters, one lane blocked for one minute will result in 10 minutes of gridlock during peak times.

That means the quicker the trouble is cleared, the less backed up traffic becomes.

And that helps reduce the frequency of secondary collisions, said Mr. Masters.

Traditionally, they account for about 8 to 17 per cent of all collisions.

But faster removal has led to a 30 to 60 per cent decrease in follow-up fender-benders.

With COMPASS, average highway speeds have also increased 7 to 18 per cent.

And traffic considered to be moving well is up by 45 per cent during peak periods.

Another COMPASS offshoot are changeable message signs, which warn motorists of traffic ahead.

That can help drivers prepare to slow down, or choose alternate routes.

Signs can indicate if the express and collector lanes are moving well.

In the case of parallel highways, they can alert motorists that Hwy. 403, for example, is smoother sailing than the QEW.

An exception so far is Hwy. 407. Since it was sold by the Province to a

private owner, the MTO has been unable to access traffic information on the toll road, said Mr. Masters.

Some of these measures will soon be heading Halton's way. They include a changeable message sign along Hwy. 403 in Oakville to warn motorists of a blind bottleneck at Ford Drive. That would allow drivers to choose Regional Road 5 (Dundas Street) as an alternative.

Closed-circuit cameras and data-information loops are also scheduled to be installed on Hwy. 403, likely by 2002.

Majority of commuters surveyed say highways are more congested

If highway congestion is easing up, it sure doesn't feel like it, according to commuters.

Project Safe Commute research — carried out through a survey conducted by the Milton Road Safety Committee — revealed that the majority of commuters driving from Halton to the GTA felt highways have become more congested in the past few years.

Studies also showed that male commuters travel between 61 and

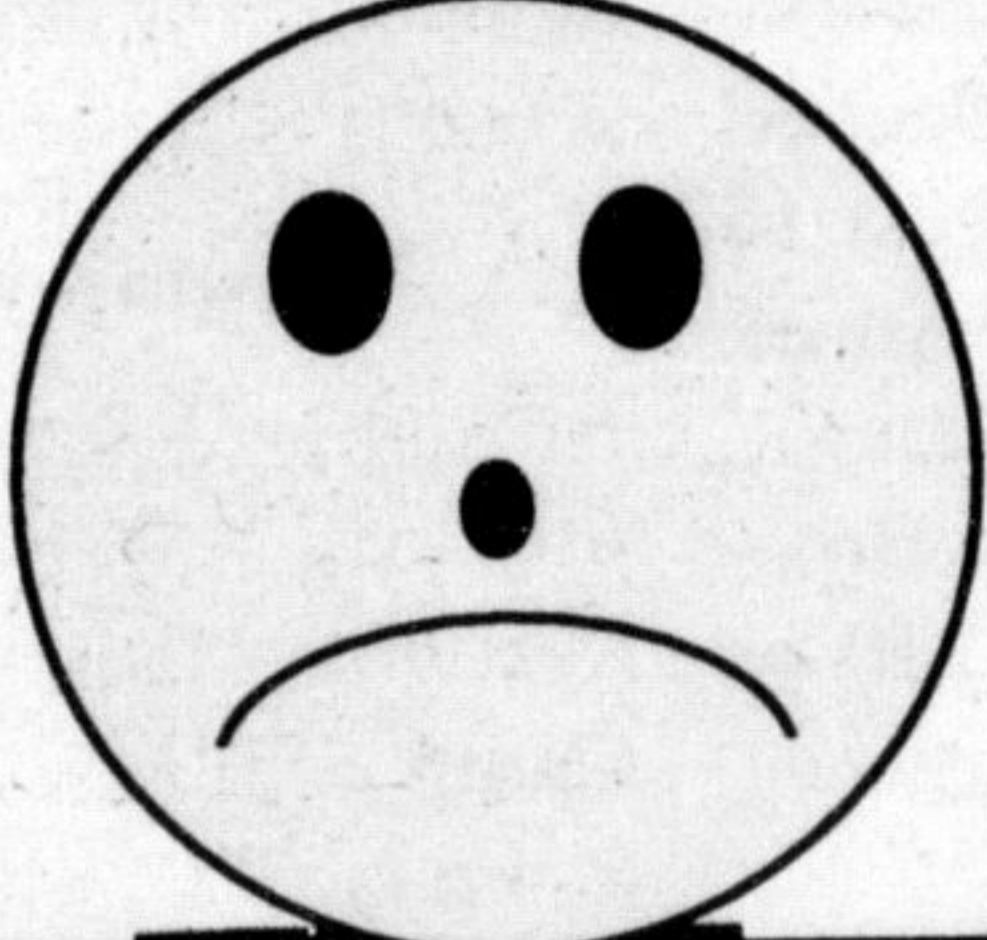
100 km each day while their female counterparts travel between 31 and 60 km a day.

The most dangerous behaviour was following too closely, followed by speeding. Commuters agreed that increased media and education — including traffic bulletins and more widely-known procedures for reporting bad drivers — would translate into a considerable reduction of highway accidents.

Of those surveyed, many said the number one reason they didn't use public transit was that it wasn't convenient.

Those wishing to complete the survey can do so by calling (905) 528-8300 or by visiting the Project Safe Commute website at www.traumaprevention.on.ca.

The survey was created in partnership with Halton Regional Police and the OPP Port Credit detachment.



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