



MARYLAND'S BUSINESS & LEGAL NEWS SINCE 1888

Conversation with ... Wes Guckert

The Traffic Group Inc.

Wes Guckert, president of The Traffic Group Inc., has been a technical advisor in the areas of traffic impact analysis, traffic signal design, traffic circulation, access studies and transportation planning. In doing so he has played a role in more than 3,000 projects that span the urban and suburban areas of Maryland, Virginia, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Delaware. Guckert recently sat down with The Daily Record to discuss traffic and answer that all-important question: "Will rush hour traffic jams ever become extinct?"

What is the biggest challenge for traffic control?

The biggest challenge is making folks understand there are no ultimate solutions. Traffic in the United States and metropolitan areas is the result of the robust economy we have. In other nations, traffic is worse because road systems cannot compare to those in the United States. If we cannot afford to build road systems, that can affect normal peak traffic.

Why don't people choose transit?

We always have the situation that we live in America where people are in love with their cars. In Baltimore and areas throughout the United States, we like to have our cars. As a society, there is the feeling in the U.S. that we've never developed areas with sufficient density to encourage transit use. Our best transit systems are in Chicago and New York. Beyond a handful of cities with the density and population to support transit, it doesn't exist.

How do you get people to demand transit?

The challenge comes in making the populous understand that you just don't go and build a subway or light rail system and be able to attract ridership. You've got to have sufficient density to make the transit system economically viable. What we do in the United States is keep giving larger subsidies for transit ridership. But take the light rail from downtown to Hunt Valley. For the cost of running it, you could have given everybody a car. In Europe and other parts of the world, you have a transit toll. We don't do that. We subsidize it. We subsidize transit and yet we do not build density. Along the Baltimore transit system, it is a real challenge to find a dense residential population along the transit lines.

Can you give me an example where it works?

You go to D.C. into suburban Montgomery County and you see a plethora of 15- or 20-story towers. In Baltimore and its suburbs, you just don't have a large number of high-rise residential towers. Yet we expect transit ridership to increase. It's a challenge to make folks understand that without a lot of density, transit certainly is not going to pay its own way.

What about building more roads?

If we were to build roads to satisfy the commuter traffic, it would be completely uneconomical. Traffic congestion is a sign of prosperity. We have it better in the United States, in Baltimore, than most of the other countries of the world. Some of the worst traffic I've seen is in the Dominican Republic. Major cities there have terrible, terrible traffic. In Europe, old cities have narrow roads.

If road construction ties up interstates, what then?

What will happen is folks will avoid the Beltway. Over time, traffic becomes lessened and then they come back on the road. In the meantime, the local population continues to demand services. There's constantly a pulling and tugging between what the people demand and what the government is able to provide with the existing tax base. So the government allows more development. When certain roads are not built to service that development, it starts to impinge upon everyone.

What about areas outside Baltimore and Washington?

In the southern area of Maryland and the Eastern Shore, there is very little development. They are always looking for jobs. In Western Maryland, when companies are looking to build, they raise their hands and say we have plenty of road capacity. But with growth comes traffic. These areas aren't going to build major transit systems.



ERIC STOCKLIN

So where are their children and grandchildren going to live and have jobs? The children will have to move to find a place to work. You hate to have them move out, but they need to move where there is traffic congestion which signifies economic prosperity. In San Francisco, one of the greatest places to live in the country, when the technology crisis hit and the bottom fell out of the dot-com industry, there was a marked decrease in traffic congestion.

Are there any solutions to rush hour jams?

In order to free up the road system, the day can't begin at 7, 8 or 9 for most of the entire population and go home at 4, 5, and 6 for most of our population. Why must we be set up as a begin and end all? As well, shopping online can help although not everyone has the ability to shop online.

Some people are willing to sit on trains for long periods of time — two-and-one-half hours — to get to work. Still, others who live in Martinsburg, W.Va., drive to Silver Spring or Greenbelt in one-and-one-half-hours or one hour and 45 minutes. It's not unusual for workers to have a two-hour driving commute.

Can you assess the road system in Maryland?

We have a terrific road system in Maryland, but road maintenance is a problem. We've seen a lot of wear and tear over the past several years. Because of the budgetary situation, we can't keep up with maintenance. Building additional lanes is not going to solve the problem. Coming out of the winter season is tough. It's difficult

for the State Highway Administration to do everything it wants to do. Again, this is part of the great economic condition we have in this state — traffic.

So is there anything under review to ease the traffic congestion?

There has been some interest in looking at the Central Business District where traffic is getting worse and worse. Experiments are likely to be tested in hot lanes for the Central Business District and charging tolls to come into the Central Business District. That would make a positive reduction. For many, many years, we've talked about commuter tolls but it is a technique that has been talked about louder in other cities. Commuter tolls do help reduce traffic by forcing people to use the transit systems and carpooling.

We're not going to build many more roads or major transit systems or expand the transit system. We need more people to get on those transit systems. Plus we need more people to telecommute one, two or three days a week. That's a technique that's big in the D.C. metropolitan area. Our experience is that productivity does not suffer, and actually tends to increase. Employers soon realize the benefit they get and the employees can cut costs up to 40 percent by cutting their clothing budget, gas, and wear and tear on their cars. It's a terrific benefit — a very positive thing.

If everyone in downtown Baltimore altered their work schedule, it would mean a 20 percent reduction in traffic instantaneously. It's a very positive way to reduce traffic congestion.

—Interview by Nancy Kercheval
Managing Editor

Reprinted with permission of
The Daily Record Co. ©2004

PERSONAL

Name: Wes Guckert

Title: President

Firm: The Traffic Group Inc.

Age: 55

Education: B.S. in sociology

Family: Married 32 years; daughter, Renee, 31, attorney, married, 1 child; son, Anthony, married, director region 1 at the Traffic Group, 2 children.

Residence: Sparks

Hobbies: Family (wife, children and grandchildren), golf, beach, work

Last book read: "It's Your Ship: Management Techniques from the Best Damn Ship in the Navy," by Capt. D. Michael Abrashoff

Favorite movies: "It's A Wonderful Life," "Father of the Bride" and "As Good As It Gets"

Mentors: Tom Hicks of the Maryland State Highway Administration and Steve Peterson, PE, private consultant