

Work from home has tampered weekday traffic

After the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically decreased traffic on Wisconsin's roads, weekend traffic now has largely returned to near pre-pandemic levels. But weekday traffic, a much greater part of the total, remains at a lower level.

Meanwhile, ridership on Wisconsin's major transit systems remains far below pre-pandemic levels. These findings reinforce that the pandemic's impact on transportation in Wisconsin could have long-term implications on where we work and how we travel.

Among the changes to daily life from the COVID-19 pandemic was a shift to working from home for some workers, primarily in white-collar occupations. Data from the Wisconsin Department of Transportation (DOT), comparing average daily traffic over the last year (April 2021 to March 2022) to the year preceding the pandemic, show weekend traffic is down just 0.2%. Weekday traffic, meanwhile, is down by 4.4%.

Traffic levels in Wisconsin's most populous urban coun-

ties, as well as ridership on the state's largest transit systems, show the likely cause is a reduction in the number of people commuting to work.

Across 16 sites in Dane and Milwaukee counties that track hourly data, average weekday traffic volumes during daytime hours declined from March 2019 to March 2022. But they were down the most during morning and evening rush hours. Compared to declines of 3% to 7% during mid-day (9 a.m. to 4 p.m.), rush hour traffic declined by at least 9.5% in each hour between 6 a.m. and 9 a.m. and by at least 8% in each hour between 4 p.m. and 8 p.m.

Declining ridership on Wisconsin's major transit systems shows an even more drastic picture.

In Wisconsin, nine bus systems have complete ridership data every month since January 2007, which include those serving the cities of Appleton, Eau Claire, Green Bay, Kenosha, Madison, Oshkosh, Racine and Waukesha, as well as the Milwaukee County Transit System.

In 2019, Wisconsinites rode on these nine transit sys-

tems a total of 48.5 million times. In 2020, that number plummeted to 26.4 million, a decline of 45.6% that is unrivaled by any other year of data. In 2021, bus ridership declined once again to 22.6 million, a decrease of 14.6% that was larger than any previous year-over-year decline other than the year prior. Madison, in particular, has seen a much bigger drop in riders than other systems.

Throughout Wisconsin, residents still aren't commuting as they did in 2019. A further change in these trends is possible as the pandemic hopefully continues to recede from its formerly prominent role in daily life. But leaders may need to rethink road and transit services to reflect how we travel in a post-pandemic world.

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