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Americans Drive 11 Billion Miles Less in March

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution – May 24, 2008

WASHINGTON – Soaring gasoline prices have caused Americans to drive 11 billion miles less in March 2008 over the previous year, marking the first time March travel has dropped since 1979. The FHWA's "Traffic Volume Trends" report, produced each month since 1942, estimates that vehicle miles traveled (VMT) on U.S. roads dropped 4.3 percent from March 2007. This is also the sharpest yearly drop for any month in FHWA history.

Though February 2008 showed a modest 1 billion mile increase over February 2007, cumulative VMT has fallen by 17.3 billion miles since November 2006. Total VMT in the U.S. for 2006, the most recent data available, exceeded 3 trillion miles. Due to the reduced driving, the U.S. Department of Transportation estimated that greenhouse gas emissions fell by 9 million metric tons for the first quarter of 2008.

 *For years transportation leaders speculated about how the public would react to \$4/gallon gasoline. Now we are seeing it in "real time." How will people respond when it hits \$5/gallon? That's something new to speculate about. Many people adjust by limiting or combining trips or using transit or other alternatives. Folks are thinking about the miles they travel and the fuel they use like never before. Will these changes be permanent? Time will tell. TW*

Orlando Airport gets \$1B Makeover

Florida - The Orlando Airport is undergoing a major makeover with a \$1 billion, five-year construction plan designed to provide more passenger space in the main terminal and upgrade the airfield to handle the future of giant jetliners. A primary goal of the project is to create more capacity for passengers in the existing airport terminal - \$499 million will be spent on this portion of the project.

A half-dozen ground transportation projects are included in the five-year plan, with a \$193 million price tag. The majority of that sum - \$103 million - will be spent on sweeping improvements to the airport's rental car facilities. The Greater Orlando Aviation Authority voted to fund these improvements by adding a \$2.50-per-day charge onto cars rented at the airport.

The construction plans detail everything airport leaders plan to do between now and 2013, short of building a second terminal. Airport officials hope to put off building the long-discussed south terminal for as long as possible. With its multi-billion price tag, the new terminal would be a risky move with the unstable position of the U.S. airline industry.

Demand for Commuter Rail to Pittsburgh Grows

Pittsburgh Tribune-Review – May 25, 2008

PITTSBURGH – Demand for commuter rail service to Pittsburgh is skyrocketing as buses have reached their maximum capacity from the suburbs of Greensburg and Arnold into downtown. Westmoreland County transit officials say building commuter rail service into downtown Pittsburgh is a top priority for the agency.

“I think the authority is ready to move forward with it. We have the funding in place,” said state Rep. Tom Tangretti, D-Greensburg, a member of the transit authority board. Commuter rail in the area has long been discussed by the agency. Last year the authority hired a local consulting company to complete a \$500,000 feasibility study for the proposed line, which should be complete by the end of this year.

Last month, the authority met with Norfolk Southern, the freight train operator that owns the tracks on which the passenger rail line would run. The railroad indicated it would allow passenger rail service on its tracks. The proposed system would have two rail corridors – one would start in either Greensburg or Latrobe and travel through Jeannette, Irwin and Trafford, and eventually into downtown Pittsburgh.

Preliminary cost estimates for the first corridor range from \$190 million for a limited-service system to a more extensive \$300 million system that would operate every 30 minutes during rush hour. The second corridor, with an estimated cost of \$140 million, would originate in Arnold and run through the Allegheny River Valley and into Pittsburgh's Strip District.

Granite to Resume Work on Delayed Oregon Project

Oregon - Construction will resume on an Oregon highway realignment project that has been delayed for nearly a year because of landslides. Granite Construction has announced that one of its subsidiaries, the joint venture Yaquina River Constructors, and the Oregon Department of Transportation have executed a change order ending a suspension after several months of exploration, redesign and negotiations.

Oregon originally awarded a \$130 million contract to Yaquina in July 2005. Once construction began, many massive landslides were discovered, resulting in excessive extra costs and the temporary suspension of the work in July 2007.

The new contract is estimated to be worth \$177 million, and the state will hold a separate reserve fund to pay contingencies if necessary. Granite officials reported that the change order states the original contract will remain in place with revisions including environmental monitoring, landslide stabilization work and compliance work, as well as a new completion date of 2011.

Rendell Pushes \$2B Loan to Repair Bridges

The Morning Call – May 23, 2008

HARRISBURG – Gov. Ed Rendell is calling on Pennsylvania lawmakers to pass a \$2 billion bridge reconstruction program before an annual summer break at the end of June. The governor's 3-year plan would fix 1,145 of the 6,000 bridges called structurally deficient in the state, which leads the nation in deficient bridges.

"This plan will shore up public safety," Rendell said. To emphasize the state's pressing need, he gave the example of a cracked piling on an I-95 bridge in Philadelphia that caused a three-day shutdown early this year. In his Rebuild Pennsylvania Initiative, introduced in February, the governor said he wants to borrow \$200 million a year over the next decade to pay for improvements in the state. The state would then use the Motor License Fund, paid for by vehicle fees, to pay off the debt.

Critics of the plan say the governor has never brought up this issue before, and Republican lawmakers are concerned about the extensive borrowing -- about \$4 billion -- in Rendell's proposed budget for the fiscal year that begins July 1. When asked why the state had not acted to address the bridge problem sooner, Rendell said he'd "increased money in [the state's] bridge repair [program] five-fold" during his term as governor. But "we need a massive program."

I-15 Express Lanes Proposed for Utah Counties

Deseret News – May 25, 2008

Utah - Transportation officials in Utah have proposed building an express lane in the north part of the state, from northern Weber County to southern Davis County. The 40-mile project is already partially underway, however Utah Department of Transportation officials say that plans for the lane to accommodate high-occupancy vehicles are still in preliminary stages.

Officials say that if the lane is completed, it could play an important role in relieving congestion along I-15. Single drivers would also be allowed to use the lanes by paying a monthly fee and displaying a sticker in their window. Charles Mace, UDOT's manager of the lane project, says that approach could some day be replaced with an electronic collection system.

Md. Officials Looking at I-270 HOT Lanes

WTOP News – May 26, 2008

WASHINGTON – Increasing congestion on two main highways in Montgomery County, Maryland has caused state leaders to consider the use of High Occupancy Toll (HOT) lanes, a concept gaining popularity around the nation. Doug Simmons, Deputy Administrator at the Maryland State Highway Administration said the state is looking at how HOV lanes, HOT lanes and mass transportation could ease the gridlock on the Beltway and sections of I-270, but haven't yet decided which is the best solution.

A study this month by the Montgomery County Planning Board said drivers may sit in traffic 50 more hours in 2012 compared to 2005. The problem is expected to be compounded over the next four years by 38,000 new homes and 127,000 new jobs. However, Simmons says that even if funding sources had already been established, it would still take 10 years to execute the project.

Not all transportation officials are in favor of the plan, though. Councilwoman Nancy Floreen, chair of the county council's transportation committee called the idea of tolls on county roads "a little over the top."

Carpooling Gains Popularity

The Boston Globe – May 25, 2008

With no end in sight to sky-high gas prices, carpooling has become an increasingly popular alternative for drivers looking to save money on their commute. NH Rideshare, a free commuter matching service provided by the New Hampshire Department of Transportation, has had double the number of applications compared to this time last year. In April alone, 86 new individuals signed up for the program; 30 joined in April 2007. The department's database now has 1,270 commuters.

"It's less expensive, it's environmentally friendly, and it's fun, too," said Gail Coffey of Hollis, N. H., who has been sharing expenses and drive time on her 80-mile daily round trip to Concord, N. H., with two other drivers for the past few months. By splitting the cost of tolls and gasoline, Coffey has reduced her expenses from \$30 to \$35 a week to about \$5.

Massachusetts commuters are also becoming more interested in ride sharing. MassRIDES is a state program that not only provides free assistance to commuters and employers in organizing carpooling options, but also allows commuters to lease, drive and maintain a van for vanpooling.

“We’re seeing an increase in interest daily, both in car pooling and van pooling,” said Jennifer Walsh Carroll, a spokesperson for the program.

According to MassRIDES figures, the average Massachusetts household spends more on transportation - 15 percent of its income - than on food. Of the 3 million people who commute in Massachusetts each day, 74 percent of them drive alone. Carroll said there are now more than 13,000 commuters registered on the MassRIDES website, commute.com.

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