

Chicago Tribune

If driving has peaked in major cities, what's next?

Jon Hilkevich Getting Around | October 5, 2015



Traffic collects on the inbound Kennedy Expressway on Aug. 25, 2015. (Michael Tercha, Chicago Tribune)

Is the car being dethroned in favor of transportation choices that help people move around more easily?

Almost 2.7 million people drive alone to work on an average weekday in the six-county Chicago region, accounting for more than two-thirds of all commuting trips, but many experts are convinced that a corner has been turned and the dominance of the car is ending in metropolitan areas around the world.

The prediction is not that the car is cruising into oblivion. In fact, excitement is building among urban planners about the role self-driving cars will play in tomorrow's cities. But dependence on the automobile seems to have peaked, and it is — more than declining — being eliminated.

"Most people can tell when they go to a city where automobile dependence is not built into its very fabric. It is different in quality. Although there will likely still be a lot of cars in all future cities, they are likely to be carbon-free and, in our view, they will be part of a mobility system that enables freedom and connection — not dependence," Peter Newman and Jeffrey Kenworthy wrote in their new book, "The End of Automobile Dependence: How Cities are Moving Beyond Car-Based Planning." (Published by Island Press.) It is the final volume in a trilogy by the authors on car dependence.

In some places, the transformation is occurring sooner than originally predicted. The number of miles traveled by personal vehicle annually in the U.S. has been declining overall for about the past 10 years, federal data show. Meanwhile, public transportation, especially rail, is enjoying record ridership gains.

Bicycling and walking have earned preferred status as alternative transportation options, particularly among millennials, who have decided that rather than own car keys, it is more cool (and economical) to use a bike-share key fob to unlock their ride, launch a smartphone app to request a ride-share driver or even occasionally rent a Zipcar.

The Internet and other technology have made selecting among the trip choices more appealing, transportation expert Sam Schwartz said, and he has correctly observed that no one gravitates to emailing and texting more than millennials.

Percentage of workers who chose to commute by ...

Location	Driving alone*	Carpooling	Walking	Mass transit
Will	81.7%	7.9%	1.0%	4.4%
McHenry	81.3	7.9	1.5	2.7
Kane	80.6	9.0	1.5	2.6
DuPage	78.7	7.3	1.7	6.5
Lake	76.7	9.0	3.0	4.1
Suburban Cook	75.9	9.0	2.1	8.3
Overall	69.4	9.0	3.2	12.6
Chicago	50.9	10.0	5.8	26.6

SOURCES: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2006-10, Census Transportation Planning, Regional Transportation Authority, Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning

*Car, truck or van

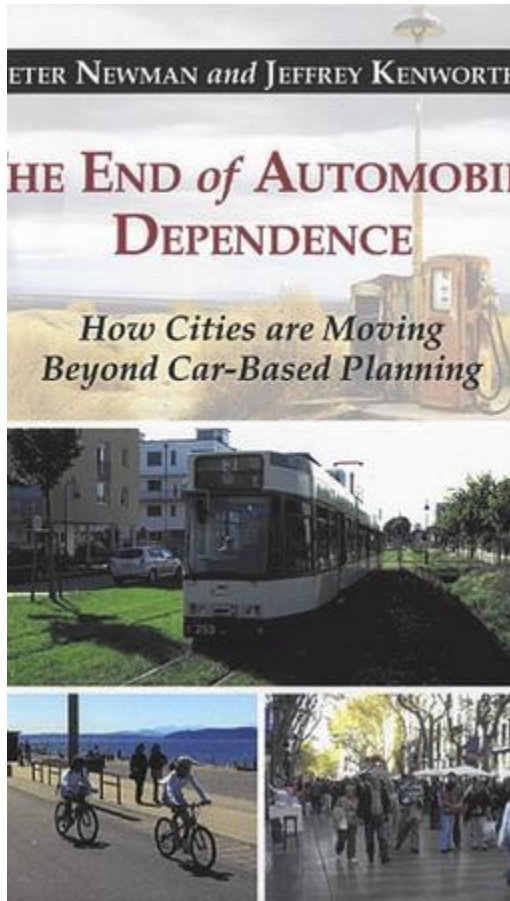
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But he said a more transcendent reason might be that millennials are the first generation whose parents were more likely to gripe about driving than to rejoice over it.

"Every generation has had the dubious privilege of learning an impressive number of curses while watching Mom and Dad drive, but Millennials were driven through more traffic jams, more often, longer, and farther than any generation in history," Schwartz wrote in his new book, "Street Smart: The Rise of Cities and the Fall of Cars." (Published by PublicAffairs.)

Millennials "observed more unpleasant driving than the Gen X, Boomer and Silent generations added together," Schwartz wrote.

Schwartz, who served as New York's traffic commissioner and for the past 20 years has headed up an engineering firm, chronicles in the book the history of urban transportation in the U.S. (growing up in Brooklyn, he has lived through a lot of it). Known in New York as Gridlock Sam, Schwartz takes a strong stand, in some cases calling upon personal experiences that streets belong to communities, not cars, and that sustainable transportation planning is helping to revitalize cities.



“The End of Automobile Dependence: How Cities are Moving Beyond Car-Based Planning” is the final book in a trilogy about car dependence.

(HANDOUT)

The city of Chicago is attempting to go the same route. The City Council last month amended the city's transit-oriented development ordinance in an effort to create more incentives for high-density housing near CTA "L" stops and Metra stations. Although the changes did not address all the concerns that were raised, the new ordinance expanded the size of the transit-oriented development zones and eliminated minimum parking requirements.

"The new legislation is important because in the past Chicago hadn't done enough to serve people who want car-free lifestyles, and we lost population as a result," said Peter Skosey, executive vice president of the Metropolitan Planning Council, a nonprofit group that promotes smart planning and development in the region. "A lot of new choices are now coming to the marketplace, and people are choosing where they want to go and how they are going to get there."

Some cities have moved much faster than Chicago to embrace the car-free concept. Vancouver, for instance, has banned park-and-ride lots around train stations — even though the parking facilities were first introduced to promote a switch to transit among commuters who drive — in favor of transit-oriented mixed-use development zones that cater to two feet instead of four wheels.

More radical changes lie ahead, and the initial ride to new destinations will be bumpy, warned Gabe Klein, Chicago's former transportation commissioner. He is an advocate of driverless cars and connected vehicles, which Klein predicted will be operating in cities over the next 10 years. Research into connected-vehicle technologies, which would enable wireless communications among vehicles and infrastructure, is aimed at reducing roadway crashes, managing traffic in real time and allowing vehicles to talk to traffic signals to eliminate unnecessary stops while maximizing fuel efficiency.

"Just as the advent of motorization precipitated a complete reshaping of the city in the early twentieth century, the self-driving car's introduction in cities will be punctuated with moments of painful transition," Klein wrote in his new book, "Start-Up City: Inspiring Private & Public Entrepreneurship, Getting Projects Done, and Having Fun." (Published by Island Press.)

But Klein argues in the book that self-driving cars potentially offer a solution to traffic congestion and highway fatalities. In addition, cities will have a chance to reclaim land that has been turned over to use by automobiles, he said.

Footnotes

•Schwartz will be in Chicago on Oct. 22 to talk about smart streets. Information to register for the event is on the [Metropolitan Planning Council's website](#).

•Klein will be in Chicago on Nov. 10 to discuss how city life is rapidly changing. Information to register for the event is on the [council's website](#).

Dixie Highway centennial

The Dixie Highway, which runs between Chicago and Miami and is the first north-south highway in the U.S., turns 100 years old this month. In Chicago, the historic route begins at Michigan Avenue and Adams Street and travels south on Michigan to 55th Street (Garfield Boulevard), then west to Western Avenue. The highway then goes through Blue Island, Homewood, Chicago Heights, Crete and south to Danville, where the route heads east into Indiana.

A ceremony is scheduled for 10 a.m. Thursday at Michigan and Jackson Boulevard. The event will be conducted by the A's R Us Model A Ford Club, whose members live in the south suburbs.

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