

# The Sierra Club Attempts to Stop I-355 Expansion in Illinois

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- By Wendell Cox

The "let's build to Bombay densities" crowd at the Sierra Club is out with its annual "chicken little" report on sprawl. In previous years, the report focused on broad themes, such as rating the nation's metropolitan areas based on their extent of sprawl (using faulty data) and drawing dubious connections between public spending and sprawl.

This year, however, the Sierra Club limits its coverage to 49 specific transportation projects around the country. And the message is clear. If it runs on rails or produces results that cannot be perceived, then the Sierra Club approves. If, on the other hand, an inch of concrete or asphalt is laid, there will be grave consequences.

So, now the organization forced to sheepishly retreat on densities greater than New York's Lower East Side at the height of the immigrant boom, is relegated to peddling transit that does little or nothing, while seeking to block the highways that take virtually everyone where they want to go.



Chicago may be the worst city in America for highway problems.

But the Sierra Club's more modest agenda is not cause for comfort. The 2002 report has received broad coverage in the press, and will be the basis of vacuous and misleading testimony before local, regional and state transportation agencies around the nation as they seek to deal with traffic congestion.

In particular, the Sierra Club report voiced opposition to the Illinois 53/I-355 Tollway in Lake County. There was the usual blather about how the highway itself would create 75 percent more traffic, as if northwest side Chicago residents, in their intense suburban boredom, are poised in their living rooms just waiting for more highways to drive on. The radical environmentalists persist in their "more maternity wards raise the birth rate" theory of highway demand, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. In fact, the developed world's worst traffic congestion occurs is where there are fewer highways.

And Chicago has some of the nation's worst traffic congestion. The newly released Texas Transportation Institute's Mobility Report places Chicago's traffic at third worst in the nation, trailing only more dense Los Angeles and San Francisco.

There is good reason for Chicago's problem: none of the 40 largest urban areas has fewer lane miles of freeway or tollway per capita. And, to make the insult worse, much of this is toll. While comprehensive data is not available, it appears that the Chicago area has less than one-half the lane mileage per capita of free highways of any other major urban area.

Simply put, Chicago may have the worst primary highway system in the country. And we're paying for this?

It didn't have to be this way. Major freeways were cancelled, which like in Los Angeles, is the proximate cause of much of the congestion. Major freeway rebuilds, like the Edens and Stevenson added virtually no capacity to their 40 year old original designs.

And, no one leveled with the people. When, for example, Mayor Byrne cancelled the Cross-Town Expressway, she did not also announce how much more time this would cause people to frustratingly spend in their cars, nor did she use "Ross Perot" charts to illustrate the more intense pollution that would be produced by the slower, more stop and go traffic.

As for mass transit, forget it as a solution to traffic congestion. Chicago has, without question, one of the best transit systems in the world. Yet it provides auto-competitive service to essentially one location, downtown (including the Loop). Despite the impressive skyline, downtown represents less than 10 percent of the region's employment.

Transit does a stellar job downtown, carrying 60 percent of commuters to work. But outside downtown it is another matter, with less than 10 percent taking transit. Further, outside downtown transit commuters have incomes 40 percent below that of downtown commuters.

What this means is that people who have a choice --- people with cars --- are not willing to take, on average, nearly twice as long to get to work on transit, if they can get there at all. No feasible level of investment can change that.

Indeed, European urban areas, with their much greater densities and more intense transit systems are faced with the same reality. The 80 percent of Parisians who live in the suburbs have little auto-competitive transit service to the 80 percent of jobs that are in the suburbs. That's why most of them, like suburbanites in Chicago, drive their cars.

Virtually every regional planning organization in the nation projects that the overwhelming majority of new urban travel demand will continue to be by automobile. There is good reason for this. The automobile takes people virtually everywhere and almost always more quickly and conveniently than any other alternative.

Chicago needs the Illinois 53/I-355 Tollway and more. Traffic congestion is getting worse and is getting worse very quickly. During the 1990s, average journey to work times increased in the Chicago area at 1.6 times the rate of the 1980s. Policies that pretend traffic congestion will simply go away if we stop building highways promise only to make it worse.

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