

While the city study is new, the data about the decrease in traffic volume is not. Keep NYC Free already [reported](#) one month ago, November 12, 2008 to be exact, on the findings released by the New York Metropolitan Transportation Council. Despite their admonitions to the contrary, both the NYMTC and city data *ipso facto* question the need for any toll tax – son of congestion pricing – measure to reduce traffic. Keep NYC Free, from the outset of the effort to impose a tax to cross the free East River (and Harlem River) crossings, questioned what the City and State now concede false assumptions about vehicular traffic entering Manhattan's midtown and downtown.

[http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/14/nyregion/14traffic.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/14/nyregion/14traffic.html?_r=1)

**The New York Times** [N.Y. / Region](#)

December 14, 2008

## **New York City Grew, but Traffic Didn't**

By [WILLIAM NEUMAN](#)

As the city's economy soared and its population grew from 2003 through 2007, something unusual was happening on the streets and in the subway tunnels.

All those tens of thousands of new jobs and residents meant that more people were moving around the city, going to work, going shopping, visiting friends. And yet, according to a new city study, the volume of traffic on the streets and highways remained largely unchanged, in fact declining slightly. Instead, virtually the entire increase in New Yorkers' means of transportation during those robust years occurred in mass transit, with a surge in subway, bus and commuter rail riders.

“What you see is that for the first time since at least World War II, all of the growth in travel in the city has been absorbed by non-auto modes, primarily by mass transit,” said Bruce Schaller, New York's deputy transportation commissioner for planning and sustainability, who wrote the study, which is to be released on Monday.

“Now we've really turned a corner in the city in that all of the growth in travel over the last four years has been absorbed by mass transit and so, in terms of the city's sustainability goals, this is very encouraging to see.”

The city's sprawling public transportation system was able to handle such a surge because of vast improvements in service in recent years, Mr. Schaller said, as well as the advent of the [MetroCard](#),

which made using the system more efficient. A steep drop in crime made people more willing to use the system, and the construction of housing in areas well served by subways also brought in many more riders.

But now the system faces its worst [financial crisis](#) in more than two decades, with officials proposing raising fares and cutting service, measures which threaten to unravel the system's gains and hamper its ability to carry riders when the economy recovers.

"The increase in transit has paced the economy," said William M. Wheeler, the director of planning for the [Metropolitan Transportation Authority](#), who was not involved in the study but reviewed some of the data at the request of The New York Times. "They're going hand in hand. I think it's pretty compelling."

"I guess now the question is what's in the future," Mr. Wheeler said. "The challenge is going to be, can you have an adequately funded transit system to be there for that economic growth."

The study is the first analysis to take an overall look at traffic and transit patterns in New York during the boom years from 2003 through 2007, when, according to the report, the city added more than 200,000 jobs and its population increased by more than 130,000.

Of course, the outlook today is very different, with the city shedding jobs and sliding into a deep recession as the transportation system grapples with its own financial free fall. The authority's next budget, facing a \$1.2 billion deficit, is expected to be grim.

The authority is hoping for a bailout from Albany early next year along the lines of a rescue plan proposed by a special state commission. The plan would create a new payroll tax in an effort to halt the service cuts and limit the amount of the fare increase.

"We're in a recession at the moment, but when we come out of that I think we're well positioned to continue in the direction of sustainable growth, provided that the support is given to transit," Mr. Schaller said.

The trend of stable traffic volumes and rising transit during the recent economic boom was in contrast to previous periods of growth, Mr. Schaller said. In the 1990s, as the economy expanded, both street traffic and transit ridership grew, though the increase in transit was greater.

In earlier decades, however, there was a general trend toward increased vehicle traffic while, for many years, transit ridership declined.

Mr. Schaller said that vehicle trips citywide peaked in 1999 and then leveled off, with a dip in 2001 as a result of the terror attack on the World Trade Center. The overall trend has been largely stable traffic volumes across the city from 1999 through 2007.

In contrast, during the years when the economy was most buoyant, from 2003 to 2007, transit ridership soared, increasing about 9 percent during those years, according to the city study.

The difference is even greater when the focus is on the core commercial district of Manhattan, south of 60th Street. From 2003 to 2007, the study found, traffic entering that area fell by 3 percent. During the same period, transit ridership into the same zone rose 12 percent.

However, the most marked change occurred in the level of travel in Manhattan that crossed 60th Street heading south. Traffic from this direction was down 8 percent, even as vehicle traffic from Brooklyn and New Jersey was largely unchanged. At the same time, transit and commuter rail ridership going south and crossing 60th Street increased.

“It’s the one place in the city that we see evidence of people getting out of their cars or taxis and getting into transit,” Mr. Schaller said. “Elsewhere what we see is the growth in travel being absorbed by the transit system, but 60th Street is the one place that we see traffic declining and transit increasing.”

He said the area was particularly well suited to such a shift. “You have very rich transit service and very heavy traffic congestion,” he said.

The flattening of overall traffic volumes, with an actual decline in Manhattan’s main business district, raises questions about the need for [congestion pricing](#), Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#)’s failed plan to charge drivers to enter the busiest parts of Manhattan.

But Mr. Schaller, whose department was deeply involved in supporting congestion pricing, said that the data did not undermine the basic principles behind the plan, since traffic levels remain well above what they were a decade or two ago.

“People can make a judgment as to whether it’s acceptable that the traffic is as heavy as it is,” he said. “If it’s stable, I think that’s good news. It doesn’t mean that it’s stable at an acceptable level.”

The study was produced in response to a city law passed in the summer requiring the Transportation Department to make an annual report on traffic and transportation trends. It is based on data that has long been collected by a variety of public agencies, including counts of vehicles made every fall at key points throughout the city. Those tallies tend to count individual vehicles multiple times as they move around the city, so they do not produce an accurate picture of the actual number of vehicles on city streets, but they do allow useful year-to-year comparisons of traffic volumes.

The Transportation Department now plans to expand its data collection to more areas of the city to give the agency a more detailed understanding of traffic trends.

It will also start analyzing data from taxis equipped with G.P.S., which will help the city to have a better understanding of vehicle speeds in Manhattan.