

Peak Car?

By Brett Wood, CAPP, PE

WAS IN GRAD SCHOOL AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY, learning my trade in transportation planning, which would eventually fall headlong into parking planning. I remember one class in which my graduate research professor spoke about transportation trends. The discussion specifically focused on how for the entirety of the modern life of the automobile the number of vehicle miles traveled (VMT) grew steadily.

Yes, there were small declines during the gas shortages in the 1970s and recessions in the 1980s, but the auto industry always recovered and the average user continued to drive more and more. My professor said that while this trend was interesting, we almost certainly would see some disruption in our lifetime that ended or reversed this steady climb in driving.

the first time since the turn of the century. It seemed that Peak Car had occurred, and people were changing course.

Changing Our Ways?

Then, in 2012 something shifted. VMT started to escalate, while auto sales returned to pre-recession levels and are steadily climbing. All of this came at a time when teenagers and young professionals began to delay or decline the decision to get a driver's license (since the mid 1980s, the rate of 16-year-olds getting driver's licenses has dropped almost 50 percent), and a greater number of professionals started to live in urban areas that support a less car-dependent lifestyle. The diverging courses were perplexing.

This begs a not-so-simple question—are we changing our ways or are we reverting to our historical patterns? A few thoughts might provide context to the actual answer:

- Coming out of the Great Recession, the rate of millennials owning an automobile was relatively low. This makes sense given the financial situation for college graduates entering the workforce. But as their financial situation improves and they start families, it becomes more reasonable to accept that they might own an automobile, even if it is not their only form of transportation.
- The U.S. population continues to increase. Even though the pace of our growth is at an all-time low, we are still growing. And while most of our population is moving toward urban centers, the net effects of growth with migration continue to push increases in rural areas that may not have the infrastructure to support a non-automotive lifestyle.

For many of the thought leaders in the transportation industry, that disruption was the Great Recession. Gas price increases, pay stagnation, and massive disruption to our financial well-being seemed to be the catalyst that would reverse the driving trend. This theory was called Peak Car—the plateauing and eventual reduction in miles traveled, auto reliance, land disruption, and pollution the automobile has borne for the last 100 years. And for some time, they were right. From 2007 to 2012, the annual VMT in the U.S. slowly decreased. The average annual miles driven per capita dropped below 10,000 miles per person for



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- The popularity of transportation network companies (TNCs) and the ride-share model has created a new wave of single-occupant vehicles that are moving between paying trips, creating more and more miles traveled.

The combination of these three elements paints a clearer picture of the change we are seeing. While annual VMT has seen a sharp increase in recent years, that per capita VMT value is increasing at a much slower rate. More people are on the road for professional-driving related trips, but fewer miles are traveled per person because we have more options to rely on.

Getting to Peak Car

Therein lies the opportunity to truly reach a level of Peak Car defined by those thought leaders (and my professor). Given the proliferation of mobility options in the industry today, we have a distinct opportunity to shape a future that experiences Peak Car. A few examples:

- Better driving and parking policies to motivate behavioral change such as congestion pricing, demand-based parking pricing, fringe park-and-ride to reduce vehicular access into urban centers, and better information to find parking to reduce miles related to cruising.
- Providing better options for daily decision-making can help people in urban and urban fringe areas to intelligently choose the cheapest, fastest, and most sustainable option for commuting every day. Data sharing, navigation engines, and user-choice applications can stimulate a much smarter transportation system.
- Better integration of connected vehicles and transportation systems and the upcoming proliferation of autonomous vehicles can help reduce redundant trips and support more efficient use of TNCs.
- Implementing micro-mobility options that help connect first- and last-mile options and make transit trips a more reasonable and feasible solution for travelers.

As professionals in this industry, we have the ability to

manage and shape these practices to support a more efficient and multifaceted future. The time is now for the parking and mobility industry to take the reins and begin to shape the future of our industry and the world around it. ♦



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