

Castle bill seeks I-95 traffic fix (The News Journal)

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Funding sought to eliminate 'chokepoints'

By SUMMER HARLOW

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Amanda Campbell smiles when she recalls how easy her 10-minute commute to work used to be.

She groans at what a pain her 30- to 40-minute drive has become since changing jobs in June -- just in time to bear the full brunt of \$4-a-gallon gas.

"I get stressed just thinking about having to drive in on I-95," said Campbell, 32, who commutes from Newark to her job at Barclays in Wilmington.

Infamous for gridlock at the Del. 1 interchange and Newark toll plaza, I-95 in Delaware -- also called the East Coast's Main Street -- could be designated a national "chokepoint" under legislation Rep. Mike Castle, R-Del., introduced Tuesday.

With Americans losing 4.2 billion hours and 2.9 billion gallons of fuel sitting in traffic backups each year, the National Highway Congestion Chokepoint Relief Act would prioritize funding for those regions designated the country's worst traffic jam-prone roads.

"Congestion will increasingly choke our roadways unless we act now," Castle said in a media event outside AAA Mid-Atlantic in Wilmington on Tuesday morning.

On I-95 through Delaware, motorists stuck in traffic waste an estimated 111,000 hours and 70,000 gallons of fuel each year.

How much money actually would go toward any chokepoint improvement projects is up in the air, Castle said, especially because funding would come from the federal transportation trust fund, which is expected to be broke next year. Also, the legislation won't be in place before next year, under a new president and Congress.

Among the criteria for spending listed in the legislation would be annual hours of delay per traveler, amount of wasted fuel and proximity to ports, airports and tourist destinations.

Prioritizing the limited resources would cut down on wasteful spending, such as the \$223 million "Bridge to Nowhere" in Alaska that would connect one small town to a small island, Castle said.

Gary Ferguson, chief operating officer for Christiana Care, said anything that would make the hospitals more accessible would be appreciated, especially considering that, when every moment counts, an ambulance stuck in stop-and-go traffic is a matter of life and death.

"Both of our major campuses are a stone's throw from I-95," he said. "Starting at 3 this afternoon, our shifts will begin to run late because of traffic starting to back up."

Traffic snarls on I-95 are everyday fodder for conversation at Wilmington Trust, said I. Gail Howard, senior vice president of the human resources department.

"They talk about the horror of their drive that morning, or the nightmare of their drive home the day before," she said. "There's the expense, but also all that time wasted. Missing their kids' ballet recital or soccer goal is disappointing, so it's affecting people's lives."

Solving congestion is multi-faceted, and will take more than just adding capacity, said Bill Osborne, executive director of the Transportation Management Association of Delaware.

Beyond changing the way transportation funding is allocated, Castle's bill also calls for more investment in alternative modes of transportation, such as rail and buses, and encourages more car-pooling, high-occupancy vehicle lanes, staggered work hours, telecommuting and other ways to cut back on the number of drivers on the road.

"There's no simple solution," Osborne said. "There are those that say when gasoline gets to \$10 a gallon, that will help relieve congestion, but we're not an advocate of that."

Mark Deckman of Newark commutes into Wilmington every day, and with gas prices topping \$4, he has started leaving his SUV at home and taking his wife's car to work. Still, he's not planning on giving up his vehicle for public transportation any time soon, he said.

"I like driving," he said. "If I'm paying \$350 a month for my SUV, I'm going to use it."

Osborne cited a recent study showing a majority of Americans will change their driving habits once gas hits \$4.50.

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