

HOW PHILLY WORKS

Center City Traffic: Philly Style Gridlock

To the great relief of anyone who cares about the future of this city, Philadelphia's downtown has changed a lot in the past two decades. Neighborhoods that had once been dying are now teeming with life, full of people who want the Center City lifestyle.

But get behind the wheel of a car and you quickly experience a flip side to all this wonderful success. These days Center City's rush hour can feel more like crosstown traffic in New York. That's one reason why Mayor Nutter set up the Mayor's Office of Transportation and Utilities soon after taking office - and put Center City congestion on its agenda.

Seventy, as you know, doesn't just care about how transparent our government is. We also care about how well it works. So we're taking advantage of these last, relatively quiet, days of summer to review the efforts of this office in today's [HOW PHILLY WORKS](#) - and give you a chance to [let them know](#) your ideas for Philly's transportation scene.

-- August 27, 2014

Why should I read this? After seeing today's paper, I'll never get behind the wheel of a car again.

For those who are behind in catching up with the latest Philly poll: An Allstate Insurance driving [report](#) released yesterday ranked Philadelphia #192 among the 200 most populous U.S. cities for getting in a car crash: city drivers are 61% more likely to get in an accident than the average driver across the country. The average driver crashes once every 10 years. Philly drivers? Once every 6.2 years. But while most of us may threaten never to drive again from time to time, it's hard to give it up. So keep reading.

I didn't realize unsnarling rush hour traffic jams was actually someone's job.

In early 2008, Center City District (CCD), that's the organization of workers in teal uniforms dedicated to the vitality of downtown Philadelphia, commissioned a [report](#) on traffic specifically for newly-inaugurated Mayor Nutter. A key recommendation was to coordinate all traffic and transportation policies and programs both inside and outside government under one umbrella. To take this task on, Nutter named Rina Cutler his Deputy Mayor of Transportation and Utilities.

A city office just for traffic jams?

The actual mission of the Office of Transportation and Utilities, which you can learn more about [here](#), is to move people, not just cars, so its efforts target all the ways people get around - including walking, cycling, and public transit, as well as driving.

Was traffic such a big problem that a report was needed?

Apparently. The CCD report said fixing congestion was critical to a vibrant and competitive Center City - and that Philly's traffic jams were not only impeding this, but causing safety hazards, pollution and other inefficiencies that were driving (no pun intended) citizens and visitors away.

Is Philly worse than other places?

Even before today's Allstate report, our fair city landed on top ten [lists](#) for cities where driving can give you a serious headache. (Travel tips: Manhattan, D.C. and Boston are worse.)

Sounds like we're about to hear some pet peeves.....

You got that right! And you probably don't need a report to remind you what they are: delivery trucks double-parked while unloading their goods; cars stuck in intersections and blocking oncoming traffic after the light changes; drivers who circle around and around, clogging narrow streets as they look for parking that doesn't exist; too few bike lanes for cyclists, and those that exist aren't clearly marked; not enough places for cyclists to park their bikes. And then, of course, the inevitable complaints about street closures for emergency repairs or big events.

So what has the Office of Transportation and Utilities accomplished?

You can read the office's own progress report [here](#). Highlights include something for everyone.

Like what?

Well, for **people expecting deliveries**, there are dedicated zones for package trucks and limits on retailers' delivery hours to between 6 a.m. and 10 a.m. – something the office says has helped drivers and also reduced travel times for buses by 14 percent. For **cyclists**, traffic lights on Lombard, Pine, and Race streets have been cut to reduce speed to 20 miles per hour. Clear bike lanes have been painted on a number of popular streets (like that big green stripe going down the side of the Parkway). And for **transit riders**, there are more bus stops along the Parkway for those who want to visit the museums, and some buses now offer real time transit information.

They're all great changes. Seems like only the tip of the iceberg though.

You're right. The "iceberg" is a Philadelphia Traffic Operations Center – which would allow controllers to see snarls and other problems in real time and respond appropriately. According to [Technical.ly Philly](#), Philadelphia is the only major U.S. city that doesn't have one. The Operations Center was originally scheduled to open this fall. But it's been delayed and now won't open until next spring.

What's taking so long?

Since when does government move quickly? To be fair though, it is a complicated project. The city must build the command center (which is planned for Juniata Park in the city's North East section), as well as install all the cameras and digital traffic signals needed to see problems as they arise and to make digital fixes (changing the timing on a light, for instance). You can read all the details [here](#), if you're really motivated.

Here's my biggest beef: Its way too hard to buy a bus token, or a pass.

Join the crowd. CCD's report flagged this annoyance years ago: You can't buy tokens on the buses, and if you use cash it costs more. You pretty much have to be a seasoned insider to know where you can get some of these tokens. (Here's SEPTA's [list](#) of vending machines and ticket offices in the underground subway and trolley stations).

I'm no city planner but this shouldn't be so hard to fix.

We agree. CCD's report suggested selling tokens at branded stores and kiosks so riders would be able to glance around and see right away where they could duck in and buy some tokens. That, obviously, hasn't been done. SEPTA, meanwhile, is planning to replace its token system over the next three years, with an [electronic system](#) that would allow riders to use their bank cards or telephones to pay. But that system, too, is obviously not here yet.

I actually really like walking through the city. What is the Mayor's office doing to help me?

You're not alone! Philadelphia's [rated](#) one of the best cities for walking. A recent CCD report (September 2013) said 25.3% of people who live in Greater Center City walk to downtown jobs. And, according to the Office of Transportation and Utilities, it's getting safer too. Its five-year progress report says re-timing of 2,500 traffic signals has led to a 10% reduction in crashes involving pedestrians.

If you ask me, it's still pretty rough when traffic is bad and drivers are cranky.

We're with you. At some intersections, there are enough pedestrians crossing that they take up all the time on the light, and don't leave enough time for cars to turn. City officials, however, say that because our streets are so narrow, the 30-second signal is plenty of time. There has been talk of making western blocks of JFK and Market Streets (from 20th Street to the Schuylkill) more pedestrian-friendly by shrinking the space for cars and widening, and greening, the sidewalks. With the hourglass on the Nutter administration winding down, the future of city transportation is likely to fall to the next mayor, though.

How would you grade the city's efforts so far?

Let's go right to the source: Andrew Stober, Cutler's Chief of Staff, gives their office a "B." Anything more would be hard to achieve, he said, given all the competing needs they have to address. But ask six other people and you're likely to get six other answers – and complaints that depend on whether they usually drive, cycle, walk, or take the bus.

From Seventy to you: Now it's your turn.

Are you a driver, walker, skateboarder, public transit rider or "other?" How do you grade the city's efforts? Any ideas for how things could work better? Give the Office of Transportation and Utilities a call at (215) 686-9003. [Tweet](#) them. [Facebook](#) them. We're sure they'd love to know your thoughts (and we bet the next mayor would too.)

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