



Advisory Council on Traffic Safety

ACTS NEWSLETTER

ADVISORY COUNCIL ON TRAFFIC SAFETY

Chester Bankston - Chairman; Hamilton County Commission

Clarence Shattuck - Vice-Chairman; Sessions Court Judge

Monica Baker - Coordinator; Highway Safety Education

Save the Date ... October 25, 12:00 NOON

ACTS LUNCHEON.... Golden Corral on Gunbarrel Rd.

TOPIC: Neighborhood Traffic Management - Questions? 209-8088

October 2017

Waze and other traffic dodging apps prompt cities to game the algorithms

Elizabeth Weise, [USA Today](#) Published 8:15 a.m. ET March 6, 2017

Call it planners versus algorithms.

Smartphone apps like Waze, a godsend for some road warriors because they shave minutes and even hours off their commutes with their creative detours off main highways, are causing headaches for city planners.

Using crosswalks, wider sidewalks and traffic lights, these transportation engineers aim to make neighborhood traffic slow, safe, and friendly for pedestrians — not send frustrated commuters barreling down side roads.

But the GPS-enabled computer programs often don't know that, or care. Their creators, such as Waze (owned by Google), are sympathetic, to a degree. They may give cities tips on how to effectively game the program so a neighborhood detour doesn't seem that appealing. But at the end of the day, the purpose of the bots is to make use of all available road space, main thoroughfare or country lane.



Photo: Noe Veloso, Principal Transportation Engineer Public, Fremont Works



Lance McCrory, Neighborhood Traffic Management, City of Chattanooga

Lance McCrory, our speaker this quarter, is the Traffic Engineer Technician for the City of Chattanooga's Neighborhood Traffic Management Program (NTMP). Residential, neighborhood streets should be people-oriented. While useful as secondary routes for the larger grid network, they should be designed and enforced as low-speed streets. NTMP assists residents in dealing with speeding in their neighborhoods through a wide variety of traffic calming measures such as traffic circles, chicanes, raised crosswalks, and intersection modification. (Source: [City of Chattanooga](#))

Commissioner's Corner



Chairman Bankston
ACTS Chairman
District 9

Technology can certainly be a double-edged sword. Using cell phones and apps make our lives so much easier, but they present challenges to our safety that aren't likely to go away.

Distracted driving and altered traffic flow, as seen in this article, can disrupt our safety, communities, and lives. Addressing technology related issues is one of the biggest challenges of our time, but I know we're up for the task!

The upshot is mounting frustration from cities, which are trying to thwart computer systems that are savvier than ever.

"Don't trust your apps!" reads one road sign in Fremont, a city of 225,000 people just north of San Jose. Located off the heavily congested 880 and 680 freeways, it's situated between major San Jose-area employers like Intel, Cisco Systems and eBay, and the more affordable housing suburbs in California's Central Valley.

With highways frequently congested, navigation apps like Google Maps and Waze started telling drivers to hop off the freeway at Fremont's Mission Boulevard, cut through residential streets and then hop back on the highway where things were clearer — much to the distress of the people who lived there.

"The commuters didn't live or work in Fremont and didn't care about our residential neighborhoods," said Noe Veloso, Fremont's principal transportation engineer.

When he contacted the navigation apps, he was told the apps attempt to prevent congestion by distributing traffic on all public streets, even to quiet residential roadways. The only way to stop the drivers was to change the street routing so these shortcuts were no longer that.

So Fremont instituted commute-hour turn restrictions on the most heavily used residential cut-through routes. The city also partnered with Waze through its Connected Citizens Program in order to share data and Information, such as the turn restrictions, so that the app takes them into account. The result has been effective, but Veloso is worried the changes may simply reroute commuters into other neighborhoods.

"We're just trying to find a balance, to eliminate some of the time savings that's sending people into our streets," Veloso said.

Fremont's situation is playing out in towns and cities across the U.S., with municipal planners just starting to grasp the scope of the challenge.



A sign warning drivers in Fremont, Calif. that they can no longer turn left between 3:00 - 7:00 pm, part of an effort to keep commuters from using the town as a freeway shortcut.

(Photo: Noe Veloso)



“Waze and Uber hit transportation planners so fast that we didn’t know what to do,” says Sam Schwartz, a former traffic coordinator for New York City. His 1992 book *New York Shortcuts and Traffic Tips* was a popular precursor to the systems and apps that have been downloaded by hundreds of millions of users.

At a conference of transportation engineers this summer, Schwartz said the topic was being discussed in the hallways but not yet in plenaries. “We need to get ahead of this, but we don’t know what to do,” he said.

Cities are struggling to get their arms around the issues the apps raise. Boston’s winding streets, some of which date back to cow paths from the 17th century, make the city especially prone to drivers taking shortcuts and back routes to get around congestion.

Jascha Franklin-Hodge, the city’s chief information officer, thinks most drivers are only using traffic apps for longer trips at this point.

But once they start using them in their own neighborhoods, or if cars start to integrate mapping technology into their systems, or when self-driving cars come into play in the future, then the anecdotal issues he’s hearing about today “will just be the tip of the iceberg,” he said.

“We can’t force an app maker to embed communal goals into their app,” he said.

Waze’s goal: Use all streets

There is some communication between cities and the major apps.

Boston, for example, uses Waze traffic jam data to help it time traffic lights in the downtown harbor area. That information helped reduce congestion by 18% month over month, according to the company.

But in the end, as Fremont found, Waze believes that public roads are intended to be used by all citizens, including to alleviate gridlock. “We use the streets within reason. We find the open road and spread cars across the grid, which lowers the risk of unsafe driving behavior,” said Julie Mossler, Waze’s head of brand and global marketing.

Neither Google Maps nor Apple Maps responded to requests for comment.

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Mapping software does have the power to slow a route down. It sets what's known as the free flow traffic value, the time it takes to traverse a given roadway based on the physical conditions, and it's generally set to the legal speed limit.

But getting those programs to lower the upper limit isn't easy. There are too many neighborhoods, too many roads and it's all too site-specific. Even getting a single area changed would be cost prohibitive to the app makers because it could potentially require staffers to make on-going micro updates. Waze says it hasn't gotten any such requests.

There's also an inherent conflict of interest between the mapping software and the cities. "In the conflict between getting you there fast versus the neighbors who are upset about drive-through traffic, Waze' business is with the drivers — because if you're not getting value you'll go use Apple Maps or TomTom," said Mark Hallenbeck of the University of Washington in Seattle and director of the Washington State Transportation Center.

Today, many planners say the only alternative cities have is by physically changing street layouts. After spending decades building streets that let drivers get from Point A to Point B as fast as possible, they're beginning to rethink the whole thing.

"If you have residential streets where drivers feel comfortable doing 40 miles per hour, you didn't do a very good job of designing them in the first place," said Jennifer Dill, director of the National Institute for Transportation and Communities and a professor of urban planning at Portland State University in Portland, Oregon.

On top of that, many of the things that used to slow people down don't anymore.

[Article Continued here.](#)



A Google maps screen showing morning rush hour traffic at the intersection of Bosworth and Diamond Streets in San Francisco, where city planners have worked to calm traffic by removing car lanes. (Photo: Elizabeth Weise)

Save the Date!
ACTS Council Meeting
Golden Corral on
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Wednesday, October
25 at 12 pm!

OCTOBER 2017