



Have we passed "Peak Travel?"

Posted by [Prof. Goose](#) on June 20, 2008 - 9:55am

Topic: [Demand/Consumption](#)

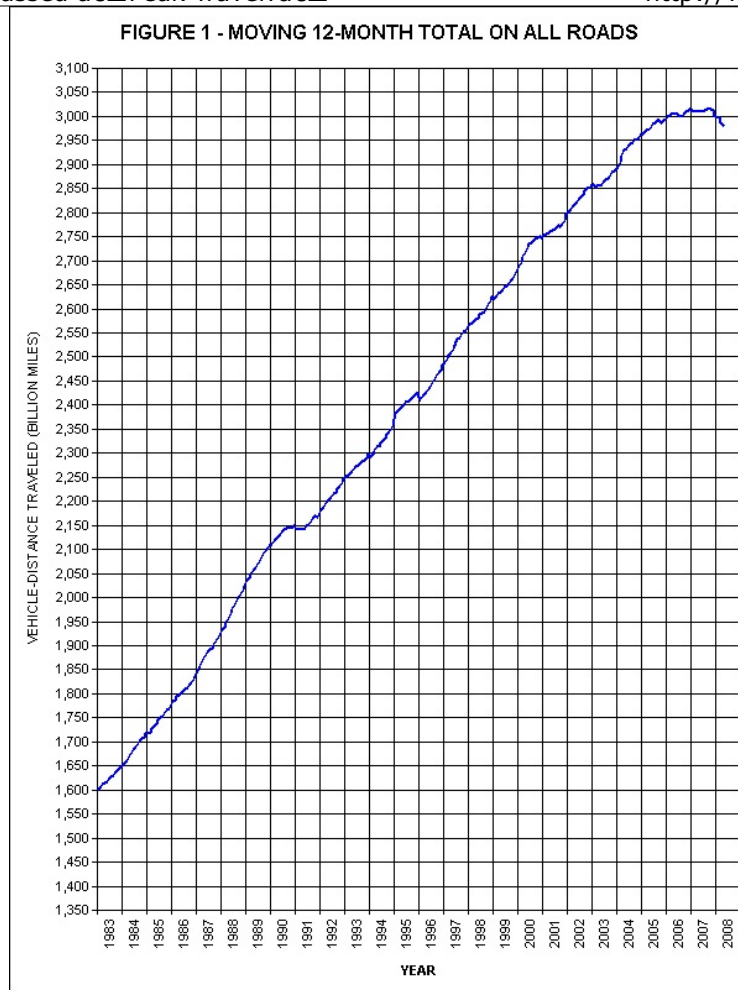
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This is a guest post by Jason Bradford who has written here previously on "[Relocalization: A Strategic Response to Peak Oil and Climate Change](#)" and "[Does Less Energy Mean More Farmers?](#)". Jason has a PhD in Biology, is the founder of Willits Economic Localization (WELL) and runs a CSA in Willits, CA.

As a fan of Bruce Springsteen, I am keenly aware of the American fetish with the automobile, and travel in general. Check out these opening lines from the 1975 Springsteen classic "Born to Run."

*In the day we sweat it out in the streets of a runaway American dream
At night we ride through mansions of glory in suicide machines
Sprung from cages out on Highway 9
Chrome wheeled, fuel injected
And steppin' out over the line
Baby this town rips the bones from your back
It's a death trap, it's a suicide rap
We gotta get out while we're young
'Cause tramps like us, baby we were born to run*

The car does more than get you between home and work. It represents freedom, sex, power, fun, status, and if need be a way to fly away from your troubles, at least temporarily. What then, does the following graphic (updated through April) from the U.S. Department of Transportation portend for "the runaway American dream?" Has the U.S. passed Peak Travel?



Here's the press release associated with the graphic:

Source: <http://www.dot.gov/affairs/dot8408.htm>

DOT 84-08

Wednesday, June 18, 2008

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Americans Drove 1.4 Billion Fewer Highway Miles in April of 2008 than in April 2007 While Fuel Prices and Transit Ridership Are Both on the Rise

Sixth Month of Declining Vehicle Miles Traveled Signals Need to Find New Revenue Sources for Highway and Transit Programs, Transportation Secretary Mary E. Peters Says

WASHINGTON – At a time of record-high gas prices and a corresponding surge in transit ridership, Americans are driving less for the sixth month in a row, highlighting the need to find a more sustainable and effective way to fund highway construction and maintenance, said U.S. Transportation Secretary Mary E. Peters.

The Secretary said that Americans drove 1.4 billion fewer highway miles in April 2008 than at the same time a year earlier and 400 million miles less than in March of this year. She added that vehicle miles traveled (VMT) on all public roads for April 2008 fell 1.8 percent as compared with

April 2007 travel. This marks a decline of nearly 20 billion miles traveled this year, and nearly 30 billion miles traveled since November.

“We’re burning less fuel as energy costs change driving patterns, steer people toward more fuel efficient vehicles and encourage more to use transit. Which is exactly why we need a more effective funding source than the gas tax,” Secretary Peters said.

The Secretary said as Americans drive less, the federal Highway Trust Fund receives less revenue from gasoline and diesel sales – 18.4 cents per gallon and 24.4 cents per gallon, respectively.

The Secretary noted that data show midsize SUV sales were down last month 38 percent over May of last year; car sales, which had accounted for less than half of the industry volume in 2007, rose to 57 percent in May. She said past trends have shown Americans will continue to drive despite high gas prices, but will drive more fuel efficient vehicles consuming less fuel. “History shows that we’re going to continue to see congested roads while gas tax revenues decline even further,” she said.

“As positive as any move toward greater fuel efficiency is, we need to make sure we have the kind of sustainable funding measures in place to support needed highway and transit improvements well into the future,” said Acting Federal Highway Administrator Jim Ray.

To review the FHWA’s “Traffic Volume Trends” reports, including that of April 2008, visit <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/ohim/tvtw/tvtpage.htm>.

The great irony of this press release is that it calls for a way to continually expand funding of highways while people are finally using them less and public transportation more! While I can’t read minds, it does seem that the Department of Transportation believes that this downward trend in driving miles is temporary. They imagine that drivers will transition away from gas guzzlers and into fuel efficient vehicles, which will be sufficient to maintain future demand for high quality pavement.

What’s at stake America? I think Bruce explains it well in the 1978 hit “Racing in the Street”

*Some guys they just give up living
And start dying little by little, piece by piece,
Some guys come home from work and wash up,
And go racin’ in the street*

Might we have to do that racing in something other than a V8? Or will the big engine be a symbol of rebellion in the face of high prices. After all, when Springsteen coined his lines the economy was struggling from high oil prices. Why would we expect it to be any different this time...right?



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