

Commuters Cause Big Traffic Problems Passing Through Little Towns

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By Eric Lipton
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Mohammad Nawab has passed by the historic homes, antique stores and Baptist church in the picture-postcard town of Clifton hundreds of times during the last three years.

But Nawab has never set foot in the quaint southwestern Fairfax County community. For him, Clifton's narrow roads are a shortcut to his Reston office, a way to avoid some of the traffic congestion that chokes the Washington area's highways.

"If I-95 was better, I would take that," Nawab said one recent morning as he sat in his 1991 Nissan Maxima on Clifton's Main Street, his tie over his shoulder and a bowl of oatmeal and berries balanced on his lap. "As long as I don't get caught behind a school bus, this way is faster."

That's fine for Nawab, but for hundreds of Clifton residents and merchants overwhelmed by morning and evening commuters, the area's rapid development in recent years hasn't exactly been a bowl of berries. Clifton, along with a few other historic towns

such as Brookeville and Fairfax City, is being overrun by motorists trying to shave minutes off their daily trips.

Because bulldozing 19th century homes and steepled churches to build wider roads is unthinkable in such communities, residents and business owners are beginning to press for construction of bypasses and new routes that they believe would restore order to their town squares.

Clifton is little more than a square mile; it has about 50 homes and 220 residents. But every day, more than 16,000 drivers from

Dale City, Woodbridge and other Prince William County communities pass through its heart, leaving behind vibrating clapboards, soot-filled air and steaming residents. Many of the cars disregard the town's lone stop sign, even when an officer is stationed just beyond it.

"The quality of life stinks right now on Main Street," said Clifton Mayor James C. Chesley, a Main Street resident.

There are similar reports from Brookeville, a 125-person town in northern Montgomery County with a post office, a former school-

house, a Methodist church and about 45 well-maintained homes.

"Screaming, horns, loud music, revving engines—anything a car can make, we have heard it," said Brookeville resident Debra Zicklatoose. "Upstairs at night, when the windows are open, all you smell is exhaust. The whole town is like one big drive-through" for commuters from Howard and Carroll counties.

Some residents see the increasing congestion as an unavoidable symptom of the re-

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According to Mayor James C. Chesley, "the quality of life stinks right now on Main Street" in Clifton.

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— Daniel Bluestone
University of Virginia historian

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Rapid Development Blamed for Little Towns' Traffic Woes

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tion's development. Others blame transportation planners, saying they should have known that these tiny towns—established more than a hundred years ago as centers of government and commerce—eventually would become popular commuter shortcuts.

"It is just irresponsible development," said Brookeville Postmaster Wayne Harding, who says he washes the soot off the outside of his three-room post office every season. "The road system has just not kept pace with all these new homes."

America's love affair with the automobile has long been at the expense of the nation's traditional communities, forcing the widening of roads, construction of strip malls, large parking lots and one-way streets, said Daniel Bluestone, an architectural historian at the University of Virginia.

"The automobile has had a corrosive effect on the landscape, architecture and social networks between people that sustained these old towns," he said. "These were settlements built to accommodate pedestrians and per-

not sure it is going to survive this one. The traffic will destroy this town if something is not done."

Brookeville, Clifton and the old section of Fairfax City are on the national register of historic places, and each reflects a connection to the region's heritage not found in the new housing developments and shopping plazas near them.

Brookeville, which will celebrate its bicentennial this month, was the nation's capital for two days during the War of 1812, when the British briefly occupied Washington. President James Madison conducted federal business in the home of a town farmer. It once was a bustling mill town, with its own tanning yard, blacksmith, shoemakers and two schools.

Clifton's birth was tied to a railroad station that was built in 1869 to handle the farm products, pulpwood and soapstone produced in the area. A hotel opened soon after, turning the town into a vacation spot for Washington and Baltimore residents and three presidents. During the Civil War, Clifton was overrun with troops from both sides.

Fairfax is built around its 1800 courthouse, where George and Martha Washington's wills are still kept. On June 1, 1861, some of the first fighting in the Civil War occurred outside the courthouse. And it was in a Fairfax tavern that Confederate Gen. Pierre Gustave Toultan Beauregard redesigned the Confederate flag after confusion with the Union flag had resulted in battlefield casualties.

Most of the roads that pass through these

towns are narrow, and the homes and other buildings are close together, near the road edges. Each road has a local name—such as Main Street or High Street—but commuters know them by their route numbers.

In Fairfax, Routes 236 and 123, two major cross-county thoroughfares, carry about 42,000 cars in and out of the downtown during a weekday.

In Clifton, Route 645 links Manassas and the Dale City area of Prince William County with jobs in the Reston area and Washington. The number of cars passing through Main Street has increased more than 50 percent in two years, according to state counts.

And in Brookeville, Route 97, also called Georgia Avenue, brings about 9,500 cars a day into the twisting, steep road that passes through the town's center. Most of those drivers are Carroll and Howard county residents who commute to jobs closer to Washington. Traffic in the town has gone up 15 percent in the last four years, Maryland officials said.

Each of the towns is looking for ways to lessen the impact of the traffic.

Brookeville and Clifton officials want new roads that would carry commuter traffic around the downtowns, like the bypass around Leesburg, another historic town in Loudoun County.

In Brookeville, a bypass has been on the regional master plan for more than 20 years, and residents there are getting tired of waiting. Speed bumps have been put in and there are warning lights at both entrances to town, but the traffic keeps increasing.

"When I bought my home here, I knew there was going to be a bypass," Harding said. "That was 14 years ago."

Brookeville Commissioner Clyde Unglesbee said town officials haven't decided where a bypass should be built. But the biggest challenge, Unglesbee said, is finding the money for the new road.

"Everything is a matter of political clout," he said. "We are a small municipality, and we have very few voters to push for it."

The state has not allocated money for the bypass, although it is studying it, said Glen A. Smith, a planner with the Maryland State Highway Administration.

Clifton's problem is more complicated than just a bypass. Many of the residential roads in the area also are clogged with traffic because of the shortage of routes over the Occoquan River linking Prince William and Fairfax counties, Mayor Chesley said.

Clifton area resident Parker T. May has formed a group called Traffic that is lobbying state and county officials to spend up to \$50 million to build a road that would take traffic out of Clifton and off other residential roads.

"It is a given that we need a new way to get people between the two counties," May said. "The question is where."

Virginia officials are about to begin searching for the best route, Chesley said, and state and local officials and transportation planners will meet in Clifton on Oct. 3 to discuss the region's congestion.

In Fairfax, there also are few simple solutions. The city has designed roads—with turning lanes, one-way streets and little on-

street parking—to allow the maximum number of cars to pass through town without delay.

The result, residents and business owners say, is a road system that moves cars quickly but detracts from the town's historic atmosphere and hurts local businesses.

"People see us as a commuters' route," said Mary Beth Cox, owner of the Ship's Hatch store in Fairfax City. "People drive through so fast to get from point A to point B, they don't think of it as the quaint little town we want it to be."

The Downtown Fairfax Coalition, a group of merchants, residents and property owners trying to revitalize the city's historic district, is pressing city officials to allow more on-street parking in Fairfax. That might add to congestion, but it would at least slow cars down in town, encouraging commuters to find a new route.

Rerouting commuter traffic would be difficult, officials said.

"We would like to move traffic to other roads, but the other roads are just as congested," said John Veneziano, Fairfax City's public works director.

Some drivers said they would gladly take other routes to work, if there were any equivalent routes available.

Brookeville "is just a little pass-through town," said Brian Smith, who drives through there each day on his way from Howard County to the Montgomery community of Aspen Hill. "There is really nothing here."