



Written by [Beverly K. Eakman](#) on June 21, 2011

Feds Set to Subsidize Rides for “Aging” Drivers

In response to a MetLife poll and a Transportation for America (TFA) survey, both published this month, a federal program is under consideration for “Fixing the Mobility Crisis Threatening the Baby Boom Generation.”

According to Peter M. Haas, chief research scientist at the Center for Neighborhood Technology, some 3 million senior citizens in Atlanta, Georgia, alone will, by the year 2015, live in neighborhoods where access to public transportation is slim to none and no option other than driving exists to go anywhere. Places such as Riverside, California; Detroit, Michigan, and Dallas, Texas, made the top ten cities facing similar high-senior populations.



In many states, seniors turning 70 already are asked to retake a driver’s test, and the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety claims that [once drivers turn age 75](#), they have accidents nearly as often as teenagers. (See graphs at bottom of link). The [American Automobile Association](#) (AAA) and the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) have the topic on their plates, with an incredible 22 federal and/or public-private partnerships also weighing in.

John Robert Smith, TFA co-chairman, thinks that since this is “a problem of national scope [it] requires a federal response” — preferably in the next transportation bill. Congress, of course, stands ever-ready to launch a new program. The Senate is reviewing the idea of basing license renewal on age and family recommendation, which might not be particularly noteworthy were it not the U.S. Senate rather than local policymakers doing so. It’s a short trip from the feds requiring a new driving test to providing seniors with federally compensated rides via a model called the Transportation Reimbursement and Information Program (TRIP), a brainstorm unsurprisingly founded in the now-broke State of California. Illinois and Massachusetts have already adopted it,

[The idea](#), which originated in Riverside County, California, “complements rail, fixed route and special public transportation services...by reimbursing volunteers to transport individuals where no transit service exists, or when the individual is too frail, ill, [or otherwise unable to make use of] public transportation.....”

TRIP also provides a toll-free hot line to the Riverside County Office on Aging, HelpLink. HelpLink makes referrals to providers, sends out brochures, routing schedules, and alerts elderly folks to the federal American Disabilities Act so they can get them start on the certification process for transit agencies — all mostly at taxpayer expense.

Concern over senior-age driving, of course, contains a *kernel* of legitimacy. The question is: should these be federal programs? The fact is, driving — from errands and doctor appointments to the daily work-commute — has become a monstrous undertaking, even for the relatively young. Forget about



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distractions like cell phones, screaming kids, DVD's, and even the radio: Today a person has no choice but to multitask on the highway. Poorly placed signs and construction alerts for lane changes; spaghetti-maze freeway off-shoots; unreadable street signs; neon billboards flashing ads; ill-paved roads; and the proverbial orange construction barriers and lane closures are enough to spook us all.

In Houston, one 40-year-old woman (who, for obvious reasons, wished to remain anonymous), told this columnist she was scared to death to get on a freeway for reasons named above. "But if I take [two tranquilizers], I can do it," she said.

How many other people out there are doing that?

In [South Pasadena, California](#), a resident reports how the main street through town, Fair Oaks Avenue, has been torn up for months in both directions. City Hall's Public Works Department responded by installing something called "bulb-outs" at intersections. This means right-hand turn lanes have been replaced with a cement bulb-like protrusions that resemble a "giant wart." The ostensible purpose is to create a shorter walk across the street for the pedestrians when, in fact, it is calculated to get drivers to walk or ride bicycles — as a politically correct nod to "sustainable development" projects.

Unfortunately, policymakers failed to think ahead and bicycle lanes have mostly disappeared; cars, ambulances and fire trucks that can no longer make an easy right turn now have a choice of negotiating a shopping-mall parking lot or running over "giant warts."

Tranquilizers, anyone?

Predictably, long-time businesses in the mall are closing.

Jesting aside, the panicky-driver situation is not uncommon, and until about 1975 would have been viewed as an opportunity for entrepreneurship. In bustling metropolises like New York City, Washington, D.C., and Dallas, the taxicab has been a ubiquitous mainstay — almost to excess. But in 1977 and again in 1989, taxi fares didn't merely increase, but did so [exponentially](#) due to a combination of unionization and city/county ordinances, which of course wanted a cut of the action. This discouraged the practice of "hailing" a taxi along a city street, but the real damage was felt in outlying residential areas, where prices became so exorbitant that many senior citizens and persons who just didn't like to drive were calling "limo services." These are not the limousines of the "stretch" variety preferred by the rich and famous. They are mere cars, which one hires by the hour or on a contract basis. The truth is, one can take a lot of taxis and "limos" for what a personal automobile costs today in upkeep, gas, licenses, emission inspections and insurance. But, again, government regs intervened.

A taxi or limo is no longer convenient. One isn't going to run to the grocery for a carton of milk any more than lug the dry cleaning home from a public bus stop three blocks away. Free delivery services offered by some pharmacies and dry cleaners are helpful, of course, but the old-fashioned spontaneity of the taxicab is essentially gone because of unnecessary rules and regulations.

Excessive regulation and unionization have led to something else, too: greed. For example, in 1990, a group of Baltimore taxi companies asked the Maryland's Public Service Commission (note: not their customers) to approve a fare increase, raising the cost of an average ride by a whopping [91 percent](#). In April 2011, Brooklyn, New York's [Yellow Cab Company demanded a fare hike](#) to match rising gas prices, thereby assuring fewer customers and shorter rides. Yet, anyone exiting a train station, hotel, restaurant or subway stop can't help noticing the plentiful interest in such occupation, seeing long lines of taxis queue up for hours, sometimes with heat or air-conditioning running, to await the lone passenger or harried couple.



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Just as the American auto worker now faces a much cheaper overseas workforce, the humble taxi driver now faces taking a passenger a few blocks instead of across the city and into nearby suburban communities. A ride from midtown Los Angeles to Beverly Hills is now a \$45 excursion, plus tip. A worker who would prefer not to drive even the short distance to a subway station, because of parking costs and/or because he or she feels uneasy driving, does so anyway because no entrepreneur has considered sending roving vans around during rush hours to canvas neighborhoods for riders. If the working public knew there would be a van making runs every 15 minutes, fewer cars (and accidents) would clog the roadways. Where are those 22 regulatory agencies, commissions, councils, centers and institutes?

The phenomenon of “anxious drivers,” moreover, is a problem rarely discussed. Governments at all levels have made this problem worse with expensive rules — not to mention their pandering to unions. [Taken together](#), these keep the price of alternative driver services high, supplies low and discourages entrepreneurial job creation — the only kind of “make-work project” that really counts.

Beverly K. Eakman began her career as a teacher in 1968. She left to become a science writer for a NASA contractor and went on to serve as a former speechwriter and research-writer for the Voice of America and two other federal agencies, including the U.S. Dept. of Justice. She has since penned six books, scores of feature articles and op-eds covering education policy, mental-health, data-trafficking, privacy and political strategy. She (and links to her books) can be reached via her website: www.BeverlyE.com.



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