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The Man Who Could Unsnarl Manhattan Traffic

By Felix Salmon May 24, 2010 | 12:00 pm | Wired June 2010

Charles Komanoff says he has the solution to New York's congestion problem—and he's got the math to prove it.
Photo: Peter Yang

The walk to Charles Komanoff's favorite lunch spot, a patisserie two blocks from his office in Manhattan's Financial District, usually takes a couple of minutes. But on this December afternoon, Komanoff has spotted a truck from the grocery-delivery service FreshDirect. His eyes widen and his steps quicken as he approaches the orange and green refrigerated vehicle. Within seconds, he's peppering the driver—politely but insistently—with questions. What route did you take to get here? How many deliveries do you make per trip? How often do you double-park? Do you leave the engine running?

Komanoff assures the driver that he is not a corporate spy. He's a traffic expert who has taken up the Borgesian task of re-creating, in precise detail, the economic and environmental impact of every single car, bus, truck, taxi, train, subway, bicycle, and pedestrian moving around New York City. And to do that he needs data. Lots of data. Which is why even the shortest walk can turn into an hours-long fact-finding mission.

When he finally gets back to his office, Komanoff will use this interview to inform his magnum opus, the Balanced Transportation Analyzer (.xls), an enormous Excel spreadsheet that he's been building for the past three years. Over the course of about 50 worksheets, the BTA breaks down every aspect of New York City transportation—subway revenues, traffic jams, noise pollution—in an attempt to discover which mix of tolls and surcharges would create the greatest benefit for the largest number of people.

Komanoff's spreadsheet, which he has posted online, calculates how new fees and changes to existing tolls affect traffic at different times of day. It calculates which costs are borne by city dwellers and which by suburbanites. It calculates how long it takes passengers to dig for change and board buses. And it allows any user to adjust dozens of different variables—from taxi surcharges to truck tolls—and measure their impact. The result is a kind of statistical *SimCity*, an opportunity to play God (or at least Robert Moses) and devise the perfect traffic policy.

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Komanoff is a dyed-in-the-wool stats geek, and the BTA demonstrates his faith in data. By measuring the problem—the amount of time and money lost in traffic every year—we can begin to solve it, he says. We can turn the knobs on the entire transportation system to maximize efficiency. Komanoff's model suggests a world in which everything from subway fares to bridge tolls can be precisely tuned throughout the day, allowing city planners to steer traffic flow as quickly and smoothly as a taxi driver tooling his cab down Broadway on a quiet Sunday morning.

It's hard for Komanoff—a fit, if slightly unkempt, 62-year-old—to conceal his pride in this spreadsheet. "It's a mansion with 50 rooms, and each one relates to all the others," says Komanoff, who shares his Tribeca apartment with his wife, two kids, and a Steinway piano.

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"Maybe this is how Mozart felt when he was scoring *Don Giovanni*."

Komanoff's masterpiece has impressed municipal traffic planners from New York to Paris to Guangzhou, China. "Charlie has created the first believable model of the impact of pricing on transportation choices," says Sam Schwartz, a former New York City traffic commissioner who actually coined the word *gridlock*.

It's also the most ambitious effort yet to impose mathematical rigor and predictability on an inherently chaotic phenomenon. Despite decades of attempts to curb delays—adding lanes to highways, synchronizing traffic lights—planners haven't had much success at unsnarling gridlock. A study by the Texas Transportation Institute found that in 2007, metropolitan-area drivers in the US spent an average of 36 hours stuck in traffic—up from 14 hours in 1982.

But the BTA, Komanoff says, will finally allow engineers to model the effects of proposed transportation policies in realistic detail. He translates all traffic impacts—delays, collisions, injuries, air pollution—into dollars and cents; that way, it's easy for users to compare the benefits and costs of different plans. He has even come up with a plan of his own that would, according to his calculations, collect $1.3 billion in motorist tolls per year—all of which would be spent on improving public transit—and save $2.5 billion in time costs by reducing delays. To that, add $190 million from decreased mortality as a result of making streets more bicycle- and pedestrian-friendly, $83 million in collision damage reduction, and $34 million in lower CO_2 emissions.

But there's one aspect of Komanoff's plan that his spreadsheet can't help with: how to put it into practice. Americans hate the idea of paying to drive on public roads. No US city has succeeded at passing any plan remotely like Komanoff's. And the response from New York City's Department of Transportation has been tepid at best. Komanoff may have created a vision of the traffic system of the future, but he's still stuck with the government and politics of the present.

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Posted by: innova | 05/29/10 | 10:42 pm |

Check out the Monoxitube, a fake tailpipe accessory that calls attention to toxic vehicle exhaust. The accessory eliminates pollution as an externality, as referenced in the article. It's a fake product with a real message about pollution.

The Monoxitube is a 25-foot tube that hypothetically attaches to the exhaust pipe of a car or truck, wraps around the vehicle, and slides into the driver's side window, sending exhaust from the tailpipe to the driver's seat.

Monoxitube – Face your exhaust – http://www.monoxitube.com

Posted by: vickiho | 05/31/10 | 6:51 am |

We've had for many years a similar system of per-entry taxes for certain busy areas in Singapore, under our Electronic Road Pricing (ERP) system. Prior to the electronic gates which debit charge cards in every car through RFID, we had a more manual system about 10 years ago where you had to buy a day-pass to the business district and display it when you drove in. The traffic police stationed wardens at the mouths of each entry point to ensure that people bought the day-passes.

It's worked, though the government gets to tweak the pricing on each electronic gate as it pleases, however.

Posted by: mkass | 06/1/10 | 11:27 am |

I think one of the most important, if unpredictable, factors in traffic analysis is the driver. And frankly after decades of driving and experiencing being stuck behind masses of apparently comatose "other drivers" the idea of taking driving out of the equation has some attraction. Here's an idea in that direction: http://organicconnectmag.com/wp/2009/12/a-unique-solution-to-traffic-the-driverless-car/

Posted by: garygrapeapplebee | 06/3/10 | 12:40 pm |

There is a basic fallacy in his calculations and most studies like it – the value of lost time. I would peg it at roughly $10/hr, not Komanoff's grossly inflated $39.53.

Here is my justification: Where I live in Northern Virginia, there is a toll road that costs (gasp!) $4 per ride and saves me roughly 20 minutes during rush hour. I value weekday time in excess of $12/hour, so I pay. But you should see the thousands who DON'T value their time that highly – they are taking the slow, but free, route.

Finally, given an extra hour, most Americans will spend it watching American Idol or some other such tripe, anyway.

Posted by: transportmodeler | 06/3/10 | 6:38 pm |

Komanoff may be remarkable, but his spreadsheet is far from being either the first or the most comprehensive traffic model ever attempted, as the article seems to imply. Professional transportation engineers and planners have been collecting data and building computerized models to inform local and regional government decision-making about infrastructure investments for decades. For anyone who is interested, there is lots of information about this active and rigorous field of research and development at the website of Federal Highway Administration's Travel Model Improvement Program (see http://tmip.fhwa.dot.gov/resources). Why don't Kheel and Komanoff use the New York Metropolitan Council's own Best Practice Model (http://www.nymtc.org/project/BPM/bpmindex.html) to analyze the policies they advocate?

Posted by: rodmaninov | 06/13/10 | 5:50 am |

The best solution: A rolling speed limit based on the average speed of all traffic set according to zone and time of day. Electronic signs would display the message "Maintain average speed" followed by a number generated by real time data processed from monitoring equipment. A five mph margin of error would allow for personal discretion, and numerical adjustment. Drivers would become cognitively aware of the most efficient times/speeds to drive, as well as the value of constant movement as opposed to the habitual jack-rabbit start/stop that most engage in. The next time you are in congested traffic, mentally calculate what you think the average speed of traffic is, then travel at that speed . . . it's an eye opener.

Posted by: dr2chase | 06/21/10 | 12:52 am |

Would be interesting to know if he includes the health effects of walking or cycling — they are large. I've heard two different, startling estimates — that for every expected-year of life lost to bicycle crashes, 10 are gained in avoided deaths from heart disease, stroke, etc. And, that the time spent on a bicycle, is more than paid back in longer (expected) life (i.e., if you spend 10,000 hours cycling, you will live an additional year. 200 hrs/year is a decent amount of cycling, 50 years of that is 10,000 hours, it would be unsurprising if you lived an additional year. So it is likely true!)

Posted by: chavin87 | 06/21/10 | 1:23 am |

Can't wait till our sun sends a solar wave so massive that will create an EMP so massive that will fry all electrical devices even cars. So all humanity will have to learn from scratch. Awesome

Posted by: mhungry | 06/21/10 | 3:47 am |

I am at odds with the definitions of "wasted commute time". From a historical perspective, we really don't spend much more time travelling to and from work than in our past. We use different, more polluting means to do so, sure. But realistically, it's not that bad. If it is that bad, then you need to make different choices about where you live and work as an individual. It's not as if you have no say in the process.

Think of it this way: We commute longer distances on average than someone 50-100 years ago, yet we also generally take the same amount of time to do it. For example, many people used to take an hour (or more) to walk 3-4 miles to work/school/church in the US midwest, or even in the city. Now I might drive from home to Seattle in a day, and have it take me an hour. Sure, it could be better. But let's face it, it's not as bad as we like to think it is.

Hence, I think the "lost wages" and valuing of that time is way overblown.

Posted by: DrNeroCF | 06/21/10 | 4:05 am |

@innova: Do you also make sure to only poop in your own face also?

-

I really hope that that was a stupid hippie and not a bot spammer, otherwise I'd feel stupid...

Posted by: syzygies | 06/21/10 | 5:09 am |

Is anyone else horrified that his programming language is Excel? This is a very subtle problem, any decent model requires a real programming language. Said Excel spreadsheet is the modern equivalent of the great american novel written out on the backs of 500 dry cleaning receipts.

Posted by: frantaylor | 06/21/10 | 5:32 am |

Hey syzygies I'm no Microsoft geek but it's just a format for a data file. You can read xls files into any of many different programs if you want to crunch on the data. Of course you can crunch in Excel too, but nobody forces you to do that. Excel is admittedly a pretty crappy program but at least it is serviceable for data entry.

Posted by: Marasbaras | 06/21/10 | 5:46 am |

If he's processing large amounts of tabular data, why not use Excel? That's where Excel does well.

Posted by: farlander | 06/21/10 | 8:47 am |

The traffic problem in Manhattan is caused not so much by the cars as by stupid people driving them, and slack law traffic rules enforcement by police. If police would impose HUGE fines for double parking, stopping in a middle of intersection, improper parking, making turns from an improper lane, not using their turn signals, and many other violations – that would clear those people's heads pretty quickly. If the roads in the city weren't so fcuked up – that would also eased traffic up a bit, because people wouldn't have to swerve around the potholes or slow down to almost a halt to get over them.

And impose huge fines on people driving in an ezpass lanes without having the tag.

I ride a motorcycle to work, and these are all the issues that if addressed would have definitely helped.

Posted by: aquinasreigns | 06/21/10 | 8:54 am |

After reading this article, and seeing this dude standing there like he is "all business badass" I just have one thing to say to this entire article……WTF ever.

Posted by: aquinasreigns | 06/21/10 | 8:55 am |

What kind of WWII tank commander pants is he wearing?

Posted by: gflem | 06/21/10 | 9:25 am |

I've got a better idea – relegate your non-essential workers to home offices and decrease the congestion problem completely by decreasing traffic.

As connected as our world is these days, it's ludicrous to suggest that every office worker in every building in Manhattan, Chicago, London, etc, still needs to physically commute to work.

Service industry folk, sure. And of course there are office jobs that still need physical presence to be effective.

But we could save a lot by being a little more sensible about our work habits.

Posted by: gflem | 06/21/10 | 9:27 am |

Also, @Aquinasreigns:

He's a bicylist. His pants are tapered closed like that to prevent getting caught and/or frayed on his chain.

Posted by: lwatcdr | 06/21/10 | 9:54 am |

People already pay taxes for the roads so they see no reason to pay a toll. Frankly it is very logical. Of course keeping people from driving in New York would be a great idea but when you try to keep people from doing what they want they get mad.
What it comes down to is people have to choose what they want and right now people want to drive their cars into big cites and want to put up with the traffic.
Frankly if I was doing to visit New York the ideal solution would be if there was a safe and secure place to park my car outside the city and take a train into the city. I can say that the trains in NY where not my idea of fun modern transit.
Honestly it is just not a simple problem.

Posted by: samagon | 06/21/10 | 10:03 am |

I hate difficult solutions. the simple solution is to raise taxes on gasoline by $2.00.
.
that money would be used to improve mass transit in every city, and to come up with clean solutions to this issue.
.
someone above stated that riding a bike increases your life expectancy, while this is true, riding your bike in towns doesn't. all of the particulate matter from cars goes into your lungs and has the same effects as smoking.

Posted by: zeroexcelcior | 06/21/10 | 10:14 am |

@ aquinasreigns
If you notice the sign in the upper right corner of the photo, his defiant stance becomes quite funny ☺

Posted by: juliec | 06/21/10 | 10:27 am |

I am also a cyclist-commuter in NYC (Brooklyn > Midtown) and vehicular traffic in this city is out of control. The fact that Mr. Komanoff also rides through the streets and analyzes transportation data makes me hopeful for the future of the Manhattan traffic grid: more bikes & less non-commercial vehicles! Ride on!!

Posted by: gflem | 06/21/10 | 10:41 am |

@samagon

Yeah, brilliant, jack gas prices up by 100%...

You do realize that increases the price for everything we buy too, right? That it's not just passenger cars that use gasoline/diesel, but delivery trucks? That the supply chain just got a whole lot more expensive, for everything from shoes to groceries to electronics?

News flash – our country is dozens of times larger than most European nations. Our supply chains work differently by necessity. European solutions aren't going to be effective for the United States.

Posted by: frantaylor | 06/21/10 | 10:46 am |

Marasbaras is unfamiliar with the 2008 presidential election where spreadsheets containing lists of Obama campaign donors were too large to be loaded into Excel.

Who are you kidding, excel is for tiny little datasets. Real datasets consume multiple terabytes of data and you need enormous servers to deal with them.

Posted by: biznatch | 06/21/10 | 10:58 am |

From the sheet "Constants":

"Pounds of Carbon per molecule of Carbon Dioxide (CO2) 0.273"

A single molecule of CO2 has 0.273 pounds of carbon? I don't think so...

Posted by: sali | 06/21/10 | 11:02 am |

just sounds like a way for politics to enter my daily commute – and a way to TAX me again and again again.

Posted by: BillySaysThings | 06/21/10 | 11:04 am |

@DrNeroCF: Proceed to feel stupid. Innova is a bot trigged probably by the keywords of "cars" or "traffic"

Posted by: BillySaysThings | 06/21/10 | 11:14 am |

@biznatch: That is weird. I wonder what that was actually supposed to say. It could be per mole, but that isn't right either because the number as far as I can tell is much lower (carbon is 12 grams per mole, and there's 454 grams in a pound)

Posted by: frantaylor | 06/21/10 | 11:45 am |

"just sounds like a way for politics to enter my daily commute"

Wow someone who is unaware that politics already utterly governs their daily commute. Who built that road? Who collects the taxes to maintain it? Who decided to put the road where it is? All of these things are political and they all deal directly with your commute. You're delirious if you think your commute is some sort of political vacuum. There are plenty of countries where politics will not interfere with your commute but trust me you don't want to live in any of them.

Posted by: ccweems | 06/21/10 | 11:45 am |

It looks like he understands the technical side but he is woefully ignorant of the political world. Currently mass transit systems all over the US are facing employee costs that are far exceeding the rate of inflation. The cause? The natural desire by public employee unions to maximize pay and benefits while reducing the amount of work done. The don't do this by themselves as they are assisted by often corrupt and incompetent city officials in the negotiation of labor contracts. These officials are then backed up by always corrupt and incompetent state officials and the current labor friendly federal government.

Unfortunately this failure to accurately characterize the reaction of public transit to more funds or less funds renders the model useless. Look at what many governments did during the tech boom: a couple of years of great stock growth was taken to be the norm which was going to generate far more pension fund revenue than was needed. Solution? Many governments reduced or eliminated employee contributions, others reduced the retirement age and others changed the game on how pension levels were calculated. The consequence of has led to extreme examples like the NY policeman who retired at 44 with a 6 figure pension that will be continually adjusted for inflation.

Should Komanoff's spreadsheet predict that funds generated by rising tolls and applied to public transportation will improve transportation in general then be prepared for disappointment. Right now assume 10 units of public transportation costs will generate 10 units of transit capacity. Road tolls applied and transportation budgets doubled. The spreadsheet will expect 20 units of cost will generate 20 units of capacity. Not so, especially in city governments. There is a dis-economy of scale in place. Increased revenue will be improve benefits, ignored maintenance will be finally performed, new capital projects started and a few workers will be hired. The expected 20 units of capacity might only yield 15, in Chicago or NYC maybe only 12.

The determination of the dis-economy of scale doesn't require interviews or arduous analysis. It can be done in most cities by carefully reading the newspaper and being able to recall prior commitments.

He is certainly due recognition for the work done so far but hold off on the messianic attribution.

Posted by: coton61 | 06/21/10 | 12:02 pm |

@biznatch & @BillySaysThings:

1 LBS CO2 has .273LBS of Carbon

Posted by: frantaylor | 06/21/10 | 12:19 pm |

ccweems read this statement again carefully: "We can turn the knobs on the entire transportation system to maximize efficiency."

There are plenty of knobs to be turned in this system that do not require the intervention of "big" government. Government agencies are given often given broad leeway to implement things as they see fit and there can be plenty of room to tweak things within that space without having to go to the legislature and engage in political theatre.

Simple things like deciding where to put parking spaces and how to align them can make a big difference, and you don't need to enact a law or revise the constitution to do them.

Posted by: mwilk | 06/21/10 | 12:33 pm |

If you look at the data provided in the article regarding number of vehicles, the overwhelming number of vehicles are private cars. Therefore, the best way to reduce congestion is to reduce the # of private vehicles. I suspect that many of individuals using private cars do so in order to access suburbs where affordable housing is more available than in the city where apartments are tiny, rents are high and multimillion dollar condos are out of reach for all but the wealthy. Therefore, the price and availability of housing are major factors in any long range plan to reduce traffic congestion. Adding a surcharge to commuters isn't going to due much if the only way to find affordable housing is to drive outside the city.

Posted by: samagon | 06/21/10 | 12:36 pm |

@gflem,

.

Our supply chain works differently because we allow it to, not out of necessity.

.

Railroads now move a ton of freight nearly 410 miles for each gallon of diesel fuel used, up from 235 miles in 1980 and 332 miles in 1990. A truck, on average, moves a ton of freight about 100 miles for each gallon of diesel fuel.

.

the tradeoff is that trucks can move cross country in about 3 days, vs 7-10 for trains. with appropriate investment in infrastructure, trains could be as quick.

.

to say that a life with higher gas prices won't work here is just a weak argument and has no validity without proof. it works in every other developed nation in the world, we are just used to the current model.

.

I don't think it will be something we can enjoy for too much longer though.

Posted by: samagon | 06/21/10 | 12:44 pm |

@mwilk

.

don't forget that people enjoy the suburb school districts more than they do inner city ones. that is usually the number 1 reason people give for living in the burbs, above the size of their house, or price.

.

currently, the expenses of owning one car in Houston are about 1/5 of a persons income (per year), I'm sure that is different in other cities, various tolls, gas price fluctuations, and insurance are all things that could adjust that.

.

the convenience a person gets from a car outweighs the savings they could acquire if they didn't have a car.

.

getting rid of the car note, and dropping insurance to liability only drops the costs, but then you're back to convenience, and it isn't very convenient if your car is breaking all the time cause it's old, or the AC doesn't work, or you can't haul a boat once every other year.

Posted by: overheadview | 06/21/10 | 2:02 pm |

Let me say I appreciate this work, but have a few thoughts:

.

First, there is a large percentage of drivers who must drive in when they do. Most employers are pretty steadfast on arrival and quitting time.

.

Second, the problem is the high cost of train fare besides subway. The Metro-north, LIRR and NJT (regional light-rail) fares are the ones to lower SUBSTANTIALLY. It currently costs $10-20 or more depending on distance a day (plus $5.50 for subway) and paying that fare does not prevent most drivers from owning a car (so the offset on car purchase, insurance & maintenance costs is not gained). Plus LIRR is $5 MORE at rush hour each way (about 6am-10am inbound, and 4pm-8pm outbound). It should be $5 LESS at rush hour!
If the train costs the same or more than gas, tolls and parking, why would the majority take it? I prefer to leave the stress of driving in traffic and nap or read (plus it's safer and better environmentally). There are some (many) who would prefer to drive over taking a train no matter the price difference. It's a perception of freedom, and is still usually faster depending on the situation.

.

Raising the fare on taxis across the board is ridiculous: the number of taxi's WOULD NOT REDUCE! (they would just drive around empty more often). Also, there are many people who live close but are inadequately served by subway. If it's a long walk on either side of the subway and you're only going a stop or two, the cab fare may be only a dollar or two more than the subway, but also be half the time. For short trips or groups of people a taxi usually stand out as an obvious choice. In my experience, the times a majority of new yorkers take a taxi would never reduce (exclude the wealthy, who hire cars daily, and wouldn't care about an increase anyway). The majority of taxis use: no other convenient transportation option, drunk, late at night, groceries, etc.)

Posted by: yishouchaohao | 06/21/10 | 2:31 pm |

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Posted by: pirellasans | 06/21/10 | 5:17 pm |

I believe the company that can unsnarl the whole world, **is obviously google.**

Posted by: trout007 | 06/21/10 | 6:38 pm |

Wow! Another top down central planner says he can fix all of our problems? Sweet lets give him total control. I'm sure his little excel spreadsheet is a perfect model of how 20 Million people go about their daily lives. After all he spent 3 whole years on it. And of course peoples desires and goals never change so that model should be good forever!

Posted by: Joe90 | 06/21/10 | 7:17 pm |

@sali "...and a way to TAX me again"
At the moment a lot of the sales and city taxes that you pay goes towards maintaining the roads that other people use. So as a die-hard, anti-tax capitalist, surely you have to support road pricing, so that everyone pays for what they use.

Posted by: CityZen | 06/21/10 | 10:42 pm |

As others point out, a big problem with giving politicians more "knobs to turn" (methods to generate more revenue) is that they will misuse them, and dial them up whenever poor planning/corruption /whatever demands more funds. This is 100% guaranteed, given enough time.

Also, given that this is a dynamic system, the constantly changing variables would likely require rebalancing the "knobs" now and again, but if that rebalancing isn't written into law in the first place, then it won't happen in any timely fashion thereafter. (Many laws that are really stupid now became that way as a result of having "hard coded" numbers that were not updated as time went along; thus we have such silliness as the Alternative Minimum Tax.)

Regarding the Monoxitube, I think it's a great idea. You're more likely to clean up your act when you have to face the crap you create than when you can make it just disappear. Along similar lines, we'd probably have higher quality products if manufacturers were required to provide recycling for anything that they made.

Posted by: munteans | 06/25/10 | 3:45 pm |

@syzygies @frantaylor

I completely agree. It's crazy he's keeping all this data in Excel. He should use an online database that can store everything safely as well as run his reports and keep updates much easier. I know online databases like TrackVia can do this sort of thing. It would be much more efficient for working with this kind of tabular data.

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