



## If business improves, Rte. 9 traffic could get worse

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With signs starting to show an uptick in commercial development along Rte. 9, officials are preparing for more traffic, which during peak hours is already unbearable for many commuters.

“(An increase in traffic) is certainly a concern,” said Southborough Town Planner Eric Denoncourt. “You could look to either side of Southborough toward Westborough and Framingham, and as each community builds up the traffic will affect neighboring communities.”

According to Metropolitan Area Planning Council representative Alison Felix, a recent study showed that the Rte. 9 corridor along Southborough, Framingham, Natick and Wellesley has the potential to expand its commercial space by 88 percent under current zoning bylaws. And with that increase in commercial space, traffic could grow by 40 percent, Felix said.

Another study conducted by the state Department of Transportation showed that traffic along Rte. 9 would increase by 10 percent by 2035, while traffic on Interstate 495 would increase by 16 percent.

While Westborough, Southborough, Framingham, Natick and Wellesley deal with the day-to-day headaches, controlling emerging patterns along Rte. 9 falls into the hands of the highway’s owner.

“Rte. 9 is controlled by the state Department of Transportation,” said Westborough Town Planner Jim Robbins. “They’re the ones to determine if there is a need for traffic control.”

In Natick, Community Development Director Patrick Reffett said the state has agreed to fund a project to reconstruct the intersection of Rte. 9 and Oak Street to help foster new businesses.

“That’s the key to making Rte. 9 work better,” Reffett said. “There are private properties that crowd virtually every inch of Rte. 9 and we don’t have the ability to make it geometrically larger, but we do have the ability to make it work better.”

On the state level, two separate studies, the Rte. 9/ MetroWest Smart Growth Plan and the I-495/Rte. 9 Interchange Study, suggest alternatives to help alleviate traffic congestion while still bringing in commercial development.

Funded through a sustainable communities grant, the MetroWest Regional Collaborative and the Metropolitan Area Planning Council are working to create a plan that would make areas along Rte. 9 more commuter-friendly.

The plan, called the Rte. 9/MetroWest Smart Growth Plan, includes the towns of Framingham, Natick, Southborough and Wellesley, and encourages developers to use specific design methods to consolidate commercial and office space so people wouldn’t have to make as many trips by car.

Bruce Leish, director of the MetroWest Regional Collaborative, said that by adopting a series of smart growth designs (which usually encourage a mix of business and housing in clustered hubs near transit options) along Rte. 9, towns could increase commercial space by 61 percent, while increasing traffic by only 16 percent.

He also said smart growth would help provide residents and commuters with a more economically, physically and environmentally sustainable development.

Leish said an example of smart growth is to stack offices or apartments above a grocery store to provide people with an opportunity to walk and get food instead of adding to the traffic by driving down street.

“If we can make Rte. 9 more walkable, people won’t get into their cars,” Leish said.

Felix said that in order for a community to be labeled as having used smart growth, it must include bicycle and pedestrian-friendly areas, plans for a bus or shuttle service and a sufficient bus schedule to provide residents with an alternative to driving.

“In order to allow (commercial) growth and lessen the impact on traffic, smart growth must be implemented,” Felix said.

During a public meeting hosted by the MetroWest Regional Collaborative and Metropolitan Area Planning Council on May 21 at Framingham State University, Randall Arendt, president of Green Prospects and an expert on smart growth, presented a number of ideas, including creating compact and pedestrian-friendly shopping centers, building apartments over stores and providing sufficient access to public transportation to keep people from driving along Rte. 9.

However, Arendt said that making changes like that takes time, and typically towns start to use smart growth techniques as developers slowly change the landscape of the area.

“In some communities we can’t make changes all at once,” Arendt said. “It’s the visioning process that’s key.”

Leish said that the MetroWest Regional Collaborative is working with towns along Rte. 9 to change zoning bylaws to allow mixed-use development in hopes that future developers will build such buildings.

Barbara Clifford, president of the Corridor Nine Chamber of Commerce, said while the idea of smart growth is interesting; supporting it could be costly.

“They had some great ideas, but that will take time,” Clifford said. “I don’t think there are any quick fixes.”

MassDOT is also studying traffic patterns on Rte. 9, specifically focusing in on the entrance and exit to I-495 in Westborough, through Southborough and into Framingham at the entrance to the Mass. Pike (I-90), with the goal of easing rush-hour traffic.

“The overall area has experienced a lot of development and this is a way to talk about what the needs are and what changes we can make to better accommodate how the area functions today,” said MassDOT spokesman Michael Verseckes. He said the overall goal of the study is to target areas of congestion and help maintain a safe roadway, while also supporting economic development.

Although the study is not complete, a presentation on March 27 suggested traffic could be reduced by redesigning the roads by adding a collector-distributor lane to I-495; creating a bridge or jug-handle road near Crystal Pond on Rte. 9; or realigning a ramp from I-495 to Rte. 9 to short circuit traffic flow.

Verseckes said MassDOT is now analyzing those alternatives and the comments made about them, and plan to bring forward a list of suggestions within the next month.

“With the amount of people we have involved, we’ve had a lot of great feedback,” Verseckes said.

But even with the number of suggestions to help alleviate traffic in the future, commuters still dread their daily trip down Rte. 9.

"To me the traffic has always been horrible here," Clifford said. "I don't think it's going to get better."

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