

# Grow & Slow

## Traffic woes are mounting along 54

06/13/05

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Messenger-Inquirer

For people like Bill Lee who drive Kentucky 54 every day, the numbers are a little scary.

"I moved out here 10 years ago in September," said Lee, who lives at 3068 Steeplechase, off Millers Mill Road.

A 2004 study showed that 19,800 vehicles a day used Kentucky 54 between Fairview Drive and Thruston-Dermont Road, according to Keith Harpole at the Green River Area Development District. Traffic backups, accidents, increased police patrols and snow removal in subdivisions are several concerns local

**officials  
have about  
the  
increasing  
development  
along the  
road. Photo  
by Robert  
Bruck, M-I**

"It was a nice quite little subdivision," he said. "There was hardly ever a problem with traffic. Today, there's about half an hour in the morning and half an hour in the evening when it's hard to even get out of this subdivision. And getting onto Kentucky 54 is nearly impossible."

Keith Harpole, transportation planner for the Green River Area Development District, says a 2004 study found 23,900 vehicles a day travel Kentucky 54 from the Wendell H. Ford Expressway to Fairview Drive -- and 19,800 from Fairview to Thruston-Dermont Road.

But those numbers likely are already outdated.

Wal-Mart has predicted that its new supercenter on Kentucky 54 will draw 7,359 vehicles a day.

Jamie Blandford, Southern regional retail banking manager for Old National Bank, which is building a new branch in front of Wal-Mart, says the bank's research predicts an increase of 15,000 vehicles a day once current developments there are completed.

And Don Fusting, one of the owners of a high-tech car wash planned in front of Wal-Mart, said he's been told that the traffic count will soon reach 50,000 a day.

Frederica Street in front of Towne Square Mall handles about 30,000 a day.

Harpole thinks the traffic projections on Kentucky 54 aren't realistic.

"They keep saying that Wal-Mart will attract 15,000 cars a day," he said. "But most of those 15,000 are part of the 23,900 that are already out there. It's not going to increase that fast."

Daviess County Judge-Executive Reid Haire also doubts the Wal-Mart projection -- but in a different way.

"I was suspect of the traffic report Wal-Mart gave us when they came in for the rezoning of that property," he said. "I think their projection was too low. I think it will draw a lot more traffic than that."

Haire said the county faces several challenges in the Kentucky 54 area.

### **Traffic 'overriding problem'**

"The overriding problem is traffic," he said. "At peak times, it's already backed up toward Whitesville and onto the ramps on the bypass. I've even had reports of traffic backed up onto the bypass itself. And that's dangerous."

"I live in Philpot," said Officer Doug Esther, spokesman for the Owensboro Police Department. "It used to be that traffic was really bad from about 7:30 to 8 a.m. But I don't come in now until 8:30 -- and it's still bad then."

"It's congested in the morning and the evening," said Capt. David Osborne of the Daviess County Sheriff's Department. "When school is in, we sometimes get traffic backed up from Highland Elementary to Thorobred East."

That's roughly 1.5 miles.

"We are starting to have some serious traffic problems," he said.

If it's bad now, it's going to get worse.

Heartland subdivision, which is off East Parrish Avenue just inside the bypass, has 368 houses now.

The U.S. Census Bureau says Daviess County averages 2.47 people and 2.5 vehicles per house.

That means there are 920 vehicles in that subdivision now.

But another 432 houses -- and 1,080 vehicles -- are planned.

Lake Forest and The Brooks -- east of Fairview Drive -- have a combined 272 houses now -- and 680 vehicles.

Another 325 or so houses -- and 812 vehicles -- are planned.

There's a 73-acre farm for sale on Settles Road south of Lake Forest that's expected to become a subdivision in a few years.

And the Owensboro Metropolitan Planning Commission has identified 317 acres where commercial development is expected along Kentucky 54.

A 1975 study that predicted Kentucky 54 would carry 18,000 vehicles a day by 1999 wasn't far off.

It was made at a time when the road carried about 9,200 vehicles a day.

That projection led in the 1980s to widening Kentucky 54 to five lanes between the bypass and Thruston-Dermont Road and building a new section of East Parrish Avenue between Chautauqua Park and the bypass to carry the expected traffic.

### **What are the solutions?**

But what's to be done about the growing traffic needs of the 21st century?

"Widening Kentucky 54 to Philpot is a top priority," said Gary Noffsinger, executive director of the planning commission. "That will be important in terms of moving traffic."

That's been talked about for more than a decade. But state money for the project has still not been appropriated.

Noffsinger said the outer loop, first proposed in 1975 as a two- or three-lane east-west connector road, is still needed.

"There aren't many alternatives to driving Kentucky 54 at present," Haire said. "The outer loop is needed now. We need to reroute some of that traffic. If you're coming from Whitesville, you've got two choices -- Kentucky 54 or cutting through Millers Mill and Settles to Fairview."

That's a shortcut to either Old Hartford Road or U.S. 231.

Fairview is seeing 5,000 vehicles a day now, and Settles was carrying 4,480 back in 2002 -- the most recent year available -- Harpole said.

In 1983, Settles Road had 1,320 vehicles a day and Fairview, 1,174.

But little can be done to improve Settles, Harpole said, because there are too many houses near the road.

This month, Lake Forest is opening a new entrance on Settles, which is expected to increase traffic there.

More traffic lights are likely coming to Kentucky 54.

"There have been requests for lights at the entrances to Lake Forest, The Woodlands and Woodlands Plaza across from Ole South Barbecue," Harpole said. "I hate to see that. I'm in the business of moving traffic safely and efficiently. And traffic lights slow it down."

"Traffic is increasing on Newbolt, Millers Mill and Settles," Osborne said. "We are starting to have some serious traffic problems."

The problem, he said, is that there "are no good side roads to take traffic off of 54. There aren't that many wrecks. It's just a lot more congestion. We get a lot of complaints about traffic backing up. They say the lights aren't timed right. That's not the problem. It's just the volume of traffic."

Osborne said: "Any time you're making a left turn out of a subdivision on Kentucky 54, you're going to have problems. A light would help traffic get out of a subdivision. But it would slow down traffic on Kentucky 54 even more."

### **Number of wrecks stable**

Esther said the city patrols out to Fairview Drive and down Fairview to The Brooks, which is in the city.

"Between Jan. 1 and May 24, 2003, we had 14 accidents between the bypass and Fairview Drive," he said. "During that period last year, there were 13, and this year there were 15. It hasn't really changed."

Overall, there were 47 accidents on that stretch of highway in 2003 and 39 last year.

Fairview and Kentucky 54 ranks as the 15th worst intersection for traffic accidents in the city and Kentucky 54 and the bypass, 16th, Esther said.

"We're monitoring that area now that Wal-Mart has opened, and we'll be watching it when school reopens in the fall," he said.

Wal-Mart will likely keep patrols in that area busy, Esther said.

"Their parking lot on Frederica had 71 accidents last year," he said. "We're hoping the new store will alleviate some of the congestion and cut back on accidents there."

Tom Shelton, superintendent of Daviess County schools, said bus routes are timed to miss rush hour on Kentucky 54.

"All of our elementary school traffic is out of that area by 7:35 to 7:40 a.m.," he said. "Buses start picking those kids up at 6:30 in the morning. After 7:30, we're still picking up high school and middle school students, but there's not as many of them."

The county and state worked with the schools to get a turn lane at Countryside Elementary School and a traffic signal at Highland Elementary School, he said, helping to alleviate congestion there.

Long-term plans call for extending Fairview Drive and Calumet Trace north to intersect with Pleasant Valley Road. And an extension of the bypass is expected to have an interchange on Pleasant Valley by 2011.

That combination will provide an alternate route to Kentucky 54 from the east -- and increase traffic on Fairview and Calumet.

Peggy Williams, Old National's southern region president, said she expects the Pleasant Valley-Fairview Drive route to become a major entrance to the Wal-Mart area.

"That will be the way our customers from Hancock County will come" to the new Kentucky 54 branch, she said.

**About This Series:** This is the second in a three-part series on the development of Kentucky 54. Sunday's article looked at how growth was slow to come to the area, but has boomed in the last five years. Tuesday's article will look what the future holds for residential and commercial development.