



# 2019 ANNUAL REPORT ON ROADWAY TRAFFIC CONGESTION IN THE DENVER REGION

SEPTEMBER 2020



## INTRODUCTION

Cities and metropolitan areas have always been places where people congregate and economic activity thrives, increasing demand for limited space. Congestion among people and various transportation modes occurs when demand reaches capacity. As the region's metropolitan planning organization, one of the questions staff of the Denver Regional Council of Governments considers is whether traffic congestion is a mild disruption or has a major negative effect on peoples' lives or a business's bottom line.

The Federal Highway Administration requires metropolitan planning organizations such as DRCOG

to maintain a congestion management process. The congestion management process monitors traffic congestion and its effects on personal travel, freight, and other related issues such as vehicle miles traveled, air quality and traffic safety. DRCOG's staff works with agencies across the region to implement projects and programs to **alleviate** some congestion, as it will never be fully eliminated. Just as importantly, DRCOG's staff helps people and businesses **adapt** to, or **avoid** altogether, traffic congestion. Federal guidance requires that DRCOG's congestion management process also evaluate the results and effectiveness of the region's investments in congestion-reducing projects and programs.





As part of the congestion management process, DRCOG prepares annual reports. Previous reports are available at [drcog.org/programs/transportation-planning/congestion-management-process](https://drcog.org/programs/transportation-planning/congestion-management-process). This report covers congestion during calendar year 2019, but as DRCOG staff were preparing it, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the U.S. undergoing an unprecedented set of changes to personal travel habits and traffic congestion. Therefore, this 2019 report is briefer than previous versions as DRCOG staff awaits updated information on travel characteristic variations in 2020. The 2020 Annual Report on Roadway Traffic Congestion in the Denver Region will explore the changes in travel caused by

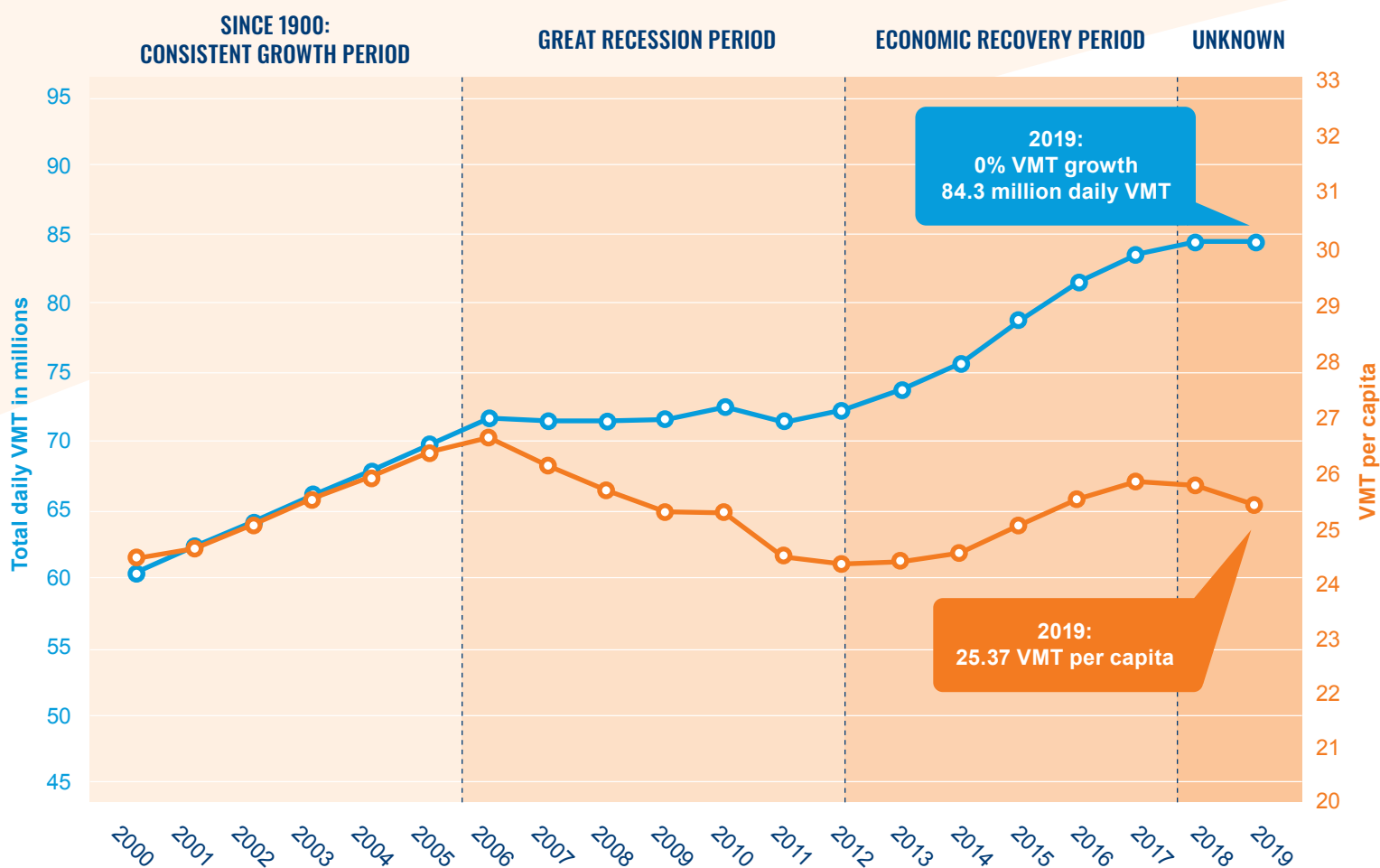
the COVID-19 response, and possible trends which may carry over into the future, such as increased teleworking.

## TRAVEL AND VEHICLE MILES TRAVELED ON A TYPICAL WEEKDAY

On a typical weekday in 2019, people in the Denver region made 15 million individual trips, 13 million of which were made in cars and trucks. People drove cars and trucks an estimated **84 million miles** on streets and highways within in the Denver region. The vehicles transported drivers and passengers more than 110 million person-miles. Hundreds of thousands of packages were delivered to homes and offices.



**FIGURE 1: AVERAGE DAILY VEHICLE MILES TRAVELED (MILLIONS) IN THE DENVER REGION (2000-2019)**



Freight and goods were picked up or dropped off at thousands of businesses. Service vehicles brought plumbers, electricians and lawn care professionals to peoples' homes. The region's residents used buses to go to their jobs, schools and health care facilities.

Regional estimates of vehicle miles traveled (VMT) in 2019 showed no change from 2018 even though the region's population increased by 1.4 percent.

**This was the first time since 2011 there was not an annual increase in VMT in the Denver region.**

As displayed in Figure 1, the corresponding weekday VMT per capita decreased for the second straight year, declining from an estimated 25.7 to 25.4 miles per day.

Three historic periods of VMT change are depicted in Figure 1. A fourth period is likely just beginning, though its characteristics are not yet known.

- **First period (Consistent Growth):** Lasting for more than 100 years, from the invention of automobiles in the late 1800s through 2006, VMT grew consistently year-by-year except for minor downturns during the early 1940s (World War II) and the 1970s (marked by an embargo on imported oil resulting in a scarcity of vehicle fuel popularly known as the "energy crisis").
- **Second Period (Great Recession):** During the Great Recession, there was no growth in total VMT accompanied by significant declines in VMT per capita. In the Denver region, the flattening of



VMT actually started in 2007, prior to the rest of the country, and continued when the effects of the recession came to fruition.

- **Third Period (Economic Recovery):** By 2012 a rebound in growth had started, with consistent annual VMT increase through 2017.
- **Fourth Period (Unknown Future):** A fourth period is now emerging with many uncertainties regarding factors affecting future VMT levels: What will be the aftermath of COVID-19 effects on travel? Will the recent increase in teleworking continue? Will fuel costs remain relatively low? How will trips be distributed among all the various modes of travel? What transportation facilities and service technologies will emerge in the next few years? How will the dynamic relationship of housing choice, supply and demand affect where people choose to, or are economically steered to, live? Will package and food deliveries continue

to grow? What does the future hold for shared-mobility and ride-hailing services?

## TRAFFIC CONGESTION ON MAJOR ROADWAYS

Traffic counts conducted by the Colorado Department of Transportation and local governments, along with private industry big data sources, indicate **traffic congestion levels and reliability did not noticeably change between 2018 and 2019.**

Outside the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which didn't significantly affect daily life in the Denver area until 2020, the year-over-year stabilization of traffic congestion is a positive trend for the region. Even though population grew, people drove less frequently on average, leading to no congestion increase.

While no major transportation projects were completed in 2019, several were under construction causing increased congestion on certain roadways, including:



- I-25 South Gap project in Douglas County
- I-25 North managed lane extension in Adams County and Broomfield
- Central 70 project in Denver and Adams County
- C-470 managed lane project in Jefferson, Arapahoe and Douglas Counties

In 2019, the number of traffic crashes and related congestion-causing incidents did not decline. More importantly, far too many people were killed (more than 260) or seriously injured (more than 1,700) on the region's streets and highways in 2019.

## HELPING TO ALLEVIATE, AVOID OR ADAPT TO TRAFFIC CONGESTION

DRCOG and its partner agencies continued efforts in 2019 to alleviate the extent of traffic congestion and help people and businesses avoid, or adapt to, traffic congestion.

- **Transportation Incident Management:** CDOT and local governments continued work on training efforts and implementation of new techniques to aid in the management of incidents and information provision to the traveling public;
- **Advanced Mobility Partnership** ([advancedmobilitypartnership.org](http://advancedmobilitypartnership.org)): The Advanced Mobility Partnership's executive committee, steering committee and working groups formally began meeting in 2019. The partnership will champion the implementation of technology-related activities identified in the Mobility Choice Blueprint ([drcog.org/sites/default/files/resources/MCB\\_Final\\_Report.pdf](http://drcog.org/sites/default/files/resources/MCB_Final_Report.pdf)).
- **Transportation Demand Management:** DRCOG's Way to Go program ([waytogo.org](http://waytogo.org)) and its partner transportation management associations provided services and held events to encourage people to reduce and avoid traffic congestion by not using single-occupant vehicles when possible. Way to Go promotes other travel

modes or avoiding traveling, such as by working at home. Office workers will likely find teleworking to be a more desirable alternative in the future. Telework may significantly reduce VMT, as well as influence other locational factors for businesses, land use and households.

- **Micromobility Services:** Until the COVID-19 disruption, private companies providing scooters, bicycles and other non-auto travel modes were thriving. DRCOG facilitates a Micromobility Work Group to share ideas and help communities develop common policies regarding physical right-of-way and data-sharing.
- **Major Corridor Studies:** Environmental and multimodal transportation studies were underway for several major corridors such as U.S. Route 85 Santa Fe Drive, Central I-25, I-270, and State Highway 119 Longmont Diagonal. The Regional Transportation District completed a study of potential future bus rapid transit corridors across the DRCOG region.

## CONCLUSION

This report was significantly shorter than previous years' reports due in large part to the unknown changes coming to the way residents live, work and play in the Denver region. While DRCOG staff typically develops annual congestion reports to track key transportation trends in the region, the cumulative effects of the 2020 pandemic have the potential to accelerate change and affect the economy, which may result in a paradigm shift that disrupts previous trends.

Even before the region faced the changes and challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, technology was altering the way its residents travel, or eliminating the need to. As the region enters an unknown future, next year's report will begin to examine the question: Will we look back at this pandemic as a bump in the road or a change of course?







## VISIT DRCOG'S PARTNER AGENCY WEBSITES FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Colorado Department of Transportation | [codot.gov](http://codot.gov)

Regional Transportation District | [rtd-denver.com](http://rtd-denver.com)

Colorado Department of Transportation Traveler Information | [cotrip.org](http://cotrip.org)

For ways to avoid or adapt to congestion, visit Way to Go | [waytogo.org](http://waytogo.org)

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