

Buffalo on 495

Accidents can always unravel the best-made plans, and it's impossible to conceive of every kind of accident.

BRIAN BRENNER

In August 2006, drivers on Route 24 suffered through an horrendous traffic jam south of Boston. The incident occurred in the afternoon, when a car and a tanker truck collided. Unfortunately for the many drivers snared in the traffic jam, the tanker was filled with raw sewage pumped from restaurant septic systems. The tanker tipped over, and the sewage poured onto the freeway. All six lanes were closed at one point, leading to a multi-mile backup in which travelers were essentially stuck in place for several hours, not moving at all. A few motorists abandoned their cars and walked away from the freeway. With the sight of abandoned cars, some compared the incident to the benchmark of Boston traffic jams: the Blizzard of '78, when motorists were trapped by the sudden snowfall on Route 128 and abandoned their vehicles en masse. The sewage jam was not caused by drifting snow, but it did pose a different kind of problem: you couldn't plow the stuff off the roads, and the unfortunate traffic vic-

tims had to deal with the stench. Snow is cold and life threatening in abundance. But at least fresh snow has a pleasant color and it doesn't smell.

Driving is our transportation mode of choice, even around Boston, which has above average use of public transport. We imagine our drives to be free and unfettered by traffic, but they're not. Driving is subject to wide schedule variability. Mussolini could make the trains run on time, but no one has been able to properly schedule an auto commute. Some traffic jams are regularly expected during commuting hours and when they don't happen, it's a nice surprise. Many other jams are caused by accidents and unforeseen events. On any particular morning you don't know what's going to crash or fall on the road. Some days, for no rhyme and reason, the traffic flow is completely clear, a gift from the commuting gods. Other days, the sh*t hits the fan or plops onto the pavement.

Literally on the Road

I remember one period that I came to refer as "building materials week." Each day of that particular week, a different type of building material fell off a truck traveling on Route 128. On Monday, it was sheet rock. On Tuesday, masonry blocks. On Wednesday, nails, and so on. Wednesday, as you can imagine, was a particularly tough day. The initial accident was bad enough, and it resulted in expressway lane closures and miles of stop and go traffic. But even after the accident was cleared,

nails scattered on the pavement added to travellers' woes, causing many flat tires. I don't remember what landed on the highway on Thursday, but by the end of the week, you could have built an addition to your house by using the stuff dumped along the right-of-way.

Navigating morning traffic takes skill, patience and a careful deciphering of the clues gleaned from radio reports. The station with the most comprehensive report and the best traffic helicopter does a reasonably good job at describing the good, bad and ugly each morning. But, unfortunately, this station has an annoying habit of switching the order of presentation from Boston roads south to north and vice versa. You never know if they're going to start with traffic descriptions from the south or the north during any particular report. This can be a problem for me because I need to know the conditions of roads south of Boston and I don't care about the north. If I'm about to make a fateful turn (hopefully for the road less traveled), and the report is describing north first, then I have to go on my gut instinct without any useful backup information.

My key decision in the morning is choosing either Route 128 or the expressway. One time, as I was about to make my decision, the traffic report just came on the radio, and as luck would have it, north was described first. Before the discussion continued to southern conditions, I made my decision to take the expressway. The views of the harbor are better, and all things being equal, the expressway saves me a few miles in comparison with Route 128. A few seconds later, conditions south of Boston were described. It turned out that Route 128 was a breeze. The expressway, however, had suffered from an historic accident leading to a two-hour backup.

Cow 54, Where Are You?

Possibly one of the strangest moments in Boston commuting history occurred when the radio reports warned about buffalo on the road. Apparently some buffalo were wandering on Interstate 495, and cars were plowing into them. Interstate 495 is the outer beltway for Boston, and much of the surrounding terrain is wooded and wild by Massachusetts

standards. But even considering the presence of forest, the problem is that there are no native buffalo in Massachusetts to saunter on the road. Interstate 495 is situated to the west, but not that far west, as in South Dakota. It turned out that the buffalo were being transported in a truck, and some had managed to flip a latch and escape onto the road. I'm not sure if the result of this was roadkill or carkill, since hitting a buffalo is not like hitting a skunk. But it's possible that if a BBQ truck tipped over in the vicinity, they could have set up a nice grill.

Wild fauna have gotten used to civilization over time and have migrated to urban areas, resulting in increased collisions and roadkill. Deer, and even moose, collisions have become problematic. The problems have not only resulted in dents on autos. A minor scandal erupted a few years ago when it was reported that the seemingly bucolic Mass Pike median in Stockbridge was used to dispose of dead carcasses. Over many decades, Turnpike officials collected the roadkill and dumped thousands of deer, beaver and other animal remains between the lanes. Upscale, charming Stockbridge, home of the Norman Rockwell Museum and the beautiful Red Lion Inn, was thus potentially the site of a Steven King novel. After word got out about the impromptu pet cemetery, dead animal bodies were no longer dumped in the median en masse, but on the sides of the road where they could be more easily eaten and disposed of naturally.

Making the Best of It

When stuck in traffic, animal-induced or otherwise, drivers have many hours of free time on their hands. There are limited options for effectively using the time — you cannot go to sleep or go bowling. Many just sit and stew. Some try to take the high road while stuck on the low road by listening to recorded books. Other commuters have found ways to creatively save time by engaging in such personal grooming habits as shaving or shampooing while on the road. But for most, the only solace is to listen to the radio. The combination of hours of time to be occupied by people trapped in cars has resulted in the development of a new art form: the morning drive-by

radio program. Drivers stuck in traffic or swerving around buffalo and moose have learned to wile away the hours by listening to shock jocks and wannabees. The original pioneer shock jock offered up an intelligent but offensive mélange of cutting sarcasm, seventh-grade boy humor and just plain inappropriate discussion. His program was driven off the airwaves by censorship, to be replaced by imitators doing essentially the same thing. The shock jock radio programs, while good for a laugh, have little or no redeeming social value. High-horse commentators have commented that the programs are yet another sign of the impending end of Western Civilization. The commentators are probably part of the one percent of Americans who ride public transit to work. So these privileged commuters can read a good book en route to work and not have to worry about hitting a buffalo.

Occasionally, I dream of mornings filled with sunshine. In the dream, I rev up my car cocoon, turn on the radio (to probably something intelligent like classical music or NPR) and breeze to work at the legal speed limit, or maybe even a tad bit more. The few drivers on the road that day are particularly friendly. Housing materials are not being transported by truck. The moose are foraging in the hills and are not around to be plowed into. When I wake up from the dream, there is still a moment when it's all possible, but then cruel reality sets in and the moment fades. Then I'm in my car listening to crud and watching the tail lights that are not far in front of me and that are not moving very fast.

BRIAN BRENNER *is a professor at Tufts University. He served as Chair of the editorial board for Civil Engineering Practice for seven years.*