



## Dr. Gridlock

Your transportation guide around the Beltway and beyond

# Older drivers, and governments, face challenges

By [Robert Thomson](#)

One of the great [challenges Baby Boomers face](#) is how to stay mobile as they age, particularly if they want to stay in the suburbs, which are ill-equipped for the travel needs of people who are driving less.

A [new study by a national organization called TRIP](#). (The Road Information Program), says Baby Boomers are likely to be more active in retirement than previous generations, and they'll expect to get around.

"Because of good nutrition, improved health care, better education and higher incomes, new generations of older Americans will be more mobile, healthy and active for a longer portion of their lives than those just a few decades ago," says the study, released Wednesday.

Among Americans 65 and older, TRIP says, 90 percent of travel happens in a private vehicle. And among those 85 and older, 80 percent is in a private vehicle.

As the vanguard of Boomers turn 65, they, their families and local governments should be increasingly concerned about preserving their safety as well as their mobility.

"This aging population will both create and face significant transportation challenges, including a transportation system that lacks many features that would accommodate the level of mobility and safety older Americans desire and expect," the TRIP study says.

Aging travelers will make some adjustments on their own.

The study notes that many travel only on familiar routes during the daytime. The avoid night driving, complicated routes with heavy traffic, and left turns.

(Making a left is one of the most complicated things we do in ordinary driving. When I speak to groups of

retirees, I note that safety experts suggest that older drivers who are nervous about the maneuver consider going up a block, then making three right turns, so they can wind up on the correct street while avoiding the left. At first I thought my listeners might scoff at the extra trouble. But many just nodded, to indicate they were quite familiar with the practice.)

While seniors have increased their transit use in recent years, transit still accounts for only 1.3 percent of trips by older Americans, according to the National Household Travel Survey, cited in the TRIP report.

The study notes that many of us are less likely to be in physical shape to use transit — or to walk or cycle — as we get older.

(There are plenty of other factors besides physical shape that affect their use of transit. When I spoke to a group of retirees at Heritage Hunt in Haymarket, they noted how much they liked to get into D.C. to visit Smithsonian museums and other cultural attractions. But they said it was difficult to use Metro, because at the midday hours they liked to travel, the Vienna Metro parking garage was likely to be full. So, they said, they might as well drive all the way.)

Older drivers need to look to their own skills. The report notes that AAA and AARP are among the organizations offering courses that not only help drivers enhance their skills but also make them aware of how certain abilities, such as eyesight and reaction time, decline during aging.

But governments also have an important role.

Many states have more stringent requirements for older drivers who want to maintain their licenses. [We've discussed that in several Dr. Gridlock columns](#). There's mixed support for it,

and I found that drivers' responses to the idea of additional road testing did not break down along age lines.

But the TRIP report adds this important note: "Some research suggests that age-based mandatory assessment programs may not effectively identify and manage the small portion of older motorists whose driving should be limited or stopped. And they may prematurely curtail the mobility of drivers who were already self-regulating and managing their driving."

The report goes on to state something that was on the minds of many of my column readers: If government is going to set up driving restrictions that curtail the mobility of older people, it should offer them some alternatives that would maintain their mobility, even if they're no longer driving themselves.

TRIP includes these recommendations for improving transit options:

Ensure that public transit vehicles, facilities and stops are easily accessible for elderly or disabled passengers.

Expanding bus and other transit routes.

Create innovative alternatives tailored to the needs of older people, such as ride-sharing systems, volunteer driving programs, door-to-door community transportation services and taxi services.

[TRIP](#), based in D.C., describes itself as nonprofit organization that researches, evaluates and distributes economic and technical data on surface transportation issues. It's sponsored by insurance companies, equipment manufacturers, distributors and suppliers; businesses involved in highway and transit engineering and construction; labor unions; and organizations concerned with efficient and safe surface transportation.]

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