

THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL

A Scripps-Howard Newspaper

MICHAEL GREHL, Editor

Published by The Memphis Publishing Co.
495 Union Ave., Memphis, Tenn. 38101

JOSEPH R. WILLIAMS, Business Manager

Page 6

The Memphis Commercial Established 1889
The Appeal Established 1840
The Avalanche Established 1867

Consolidated July 1, 1894

Tuesday, April 29, 1980

Editorial Check!

TRANSIT

Planning With The People

THERE IS GROWING evidence that transportation in America is passing from a period of evolution to a period of revolution. And the question becomes: Have urban officials charged with planning ahead fallen behind?

The answer is important to the future efficiency of all cities, but especially so to cities such as Memphis in which expansion in the postwar 1950s was designed for the private automobile.

The major U.S. manufacturers have conceded that they misread consumer reaction to the fuel crunch brought on by the Arab oil embargo of 1973-74 and failed to deliver small gas-saving domestic cars. Today, after new disruptions of supply and soaring prices for gasoline, Japanese imports have captured some 21 per cent of the American car market (more than Ford and Chrysler combined), and Detroit says it will be three years before domestic automakers can catch up with what the buyers want. It has been reported that General Motors alone must spend \$38 billion between now and 1985 to retool its massive production facilities for "little" cars.

And there are other signs of dramatic change. In February, Los Angeles — the Mecca of the Free-way Society — ordered 940 General Motors RTS-II advance-design buses, the largest bus order for a single transit district in U.S. history. Demand for GM coaches has been so great, in fact, that extra production shifts have been ordered at the Pontiac, Mich., plant to keep 60 a week rolling off the assembly line.

NOW COMES A Gallup poll indicating that 87 per cent of all American car owners have changed their driving habits in direct response to gas prices. The sharp reduction in private auto travel occurred between February, 1979, when the average price of a gallon of gasoline in this country was 70.7 cents, and February, 1980, when it had risen to

\$1.12. Since official estimates figure the average will hit \$1.60 to \$1.65 by the end of this year, there can be little doubt the trend will continue.

According to the Gallup survey, ordered by the Highway Users Federation, most motorists who were driving less had cut down on weekend and social driving (63 per cent), shopping trips by car (49 per cent), or were taking shorter vacation trips by car (18 per cent). Another 12 per cent said they had cut out vacation driving altogether.

One-fifth of those who had driven to work alone a year ago said they were now pooling rides or using public transportation. And almost three-fourths of all car owners indicated they could eliminate still more driving.

All of this suggests that some gears have to be shifted in local government planning offices. In Memphis, it questions the findings of a recently-announced traffic study, which concluded that new roads are needed between the interstate highway bridges downtown, or else "increasing traffic on existing streets would result in negative impacts in terms of air quality, noise pollution, access, and safety, and could seriously inhibit economic development of the downtown area."

And the new directions in personal and business travel ask questions about the data on which other community planning decisions are pending, in the areas like land use, recreation, parking and transit.

Is this the time, for example, for city officials to make budget cuts which may force the Memphis Area Transit Authority to reduce bus service or raise fares or both?

THE AMERICAN AUTO industry is paying a heavy price today for falling out of step with its own consumers. American cities shouldn't make the same mistake with the desires of their own people.

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