

When the Weather Has Impact Similar to a Pandemic

The LVPC has since March been closely following how the COVID-19 Pandemic has impacted traffic across the region, but August offered an interesting example of another factor that can have just as much impact on how many people travel our roadways.

The weather.

The latest LVPC and PennDOT traffic counts showed the Lehigh Valley continuing its path to normalcy as workers and consumers gradually return to the road in the wake of the COVID-19 shutdown orders. By early August, traffic declines of more than 40% during the height of the Pandemic were less than 5% below pre-pandemic levels.

But then came August 4. That day traffic at key points along Interstate 78, Route 33 and Route 309 fell 25%.

Why? That was the day remnants of Hurricane Isaias dumped 4.92 inches of rain in less than 15 hours, as measured at the Lehigh Valley International Airport. Just like that, nearly 60,000 vehicles that traveled along those key arteries the week before, didn't take to the roads.

"In the transportation game Mother Nature often has a lot to say," said Brian Hite, LVPC Senior Planning Technician. "People were smart and heeded warnings from law enforcement and PennDOT that there was a significant weather event occurring that day."

And why not? The rain total that day was the most in the region since 2010, and the sixth most in nearly a century, with the highest coming October 8, 2005 at 8.71 inches.

Not surprisingly, the drop in traffic August 4 was mostly from commuters and consumers staying home because tractor-trailer traffic was down only about 10% that day.

"This tells us something obvious, but certainly is important to understand in numbers," Hite reported to Planning Commissioners last week. "People avoid driving during major weather events, but the show must go on for freight and goods movements."

Below are two graphics that track total vehicle traffic and total truck traffic, dating back to early March, before schools, businesses and public offices began closing to help slow the spread of the COVID-19 virus, and a third graphic that shows the dates with the region's highest rain totals. The Lehigh Valley moved into the partial opening yellow phase on June 5, and then to the less restrictive green phase on June 26.

