



Our Road Network Doesn't Know The Pandemic Is Still Here

The continued need for masks, vaccinations and social distancing make it clear that we very much remain in the midst of a surging global pandemic, but the Lehigh Valley's road system is telling a very different story.

According to the region's road network, the COVID-19 Pandemic – or at least its impacts on our travel habits – have subsided, as traffic on some of the Lehigh Valley's roadways now equals, and in some cases, surpasses pre-pandemic levels.

Blame it on people returning to most aspects of life, even as some still work from home, or blame it on the increasing parade of Amazon and FedEx trucks wearing a path to your doorstep, but the numbers don't lie. Total traffic that dropped nearly 50% virtually overnight along key sections of highway in the Lehigh Valley in March of 2020, had regained all that loss and began 2022 about 4% above pre-pandemic levels, according to traffic counts done by the LVPC and Pennsylvania Department of Transportation.

The most recent traffic count numbers can be found at lvpc.org

“Our COVID-19 numbers are still high and yet our traffic numbers are up,” said LVPC Transportation Planner Brian Hite. “That just tells us people have adapted. They always do.”

According to daily traffic counters, traffic along Route 33 at the Route 248 interchange was 77,192 vehicles before the Pandemic fell to about 40,000 through April of 2020 but is now above 80,000 vehicles.

Counters along Interstate-78 in Lehigh County show a similar trend line with 66,413 falling to about 35,000 before nudging up to about 70,000 this year.

None of that is to suggest the Pandemic is having no impact. There are certainly more people working from home. Estimates by the Bureau of Labor Statistics show that just under 6% of employees were working from home before the Pandemic. That abruptly surged to 35% in May of 2020. But that number has gradually settled in at a little more than 11%.

So, why would traffic numbers still be up, while twice as many people work from home? Because while people may not be driving to work every day, they’re back to conducting other parts of daily life, from buying groceries to taking the kids to school and soccer practice.

“If anything, I’d say more parents are driving their kids to school because they don’t want them on a crowded bus, or maybe it’s just because they now have the flexibility to drive them,” Hite said. “And maybe not as many people are going to restaurants, but more are ordering food. The restaurant is coming to them and that still involves a vehicle.”

The good news is that means that the morning and evening rush hours are probably slightly less congested than before the Pandemic because at least a few vehicle trips are now spread throughout the day, Hite said.

One factor that is not helping relieve congestion is the increase in trucks. While total vehicle traffic is up slightly, by the close of 2021 truck traffic was up roughly 16% along key areas of I-78. And unlike passenger vehicle traffic that fell fast and far in March of 2020, trucks mostly remained on the road to keep supply chains moving. That was particularly evident in the Lehigh Valley, which has become one of the fastest-growing regions for the movement of goods, and the Pandemic only accelerated our national compulsion for online shopping that requires two-day or even overnight delivery.

In fact, that 16% increase would likely be higher if not for a nationwide truck driver shortage that’s particularly acute here, said Bob Dolan, president of the Pennsylvania Motor Truck Association, Lehigh Valley Division.

“We never stopped or really even slowed down during the Pandemic,” Dolan said. “But I’m surprised we’re up 16% with as many trucks that we have sitting idle.”

There's no reason to believe that will change anytime soon. Online shopping continues to increase every year and the 2020 Census showed that Lehigh Valley remains one of the fastest-growing regions in Pennsylvania, taking in roughly 4,000 more residents every year.

The Pandemic might even accelerate population growth here because with more workers having the option to work from home, many are choosing to live in the Lehigh Valley because of its affordability and quality of life, said Gay Cororaton, Senior Economist and Director of Housing and Commercial Research with the National Association of Realtors.

"That flexibility of some to live anywhere and still keep their jobs has made the Lehigh Valley a very attractive place to locate," Cororaton said. "We see that continuing."

What that all means is that despite a Pandemic that's about to enter its third year, and the evolving lifestyle habits it has spurred, we can expect the region's transportation network to continue to be challenged by the Lehigh Valley's growth and success.