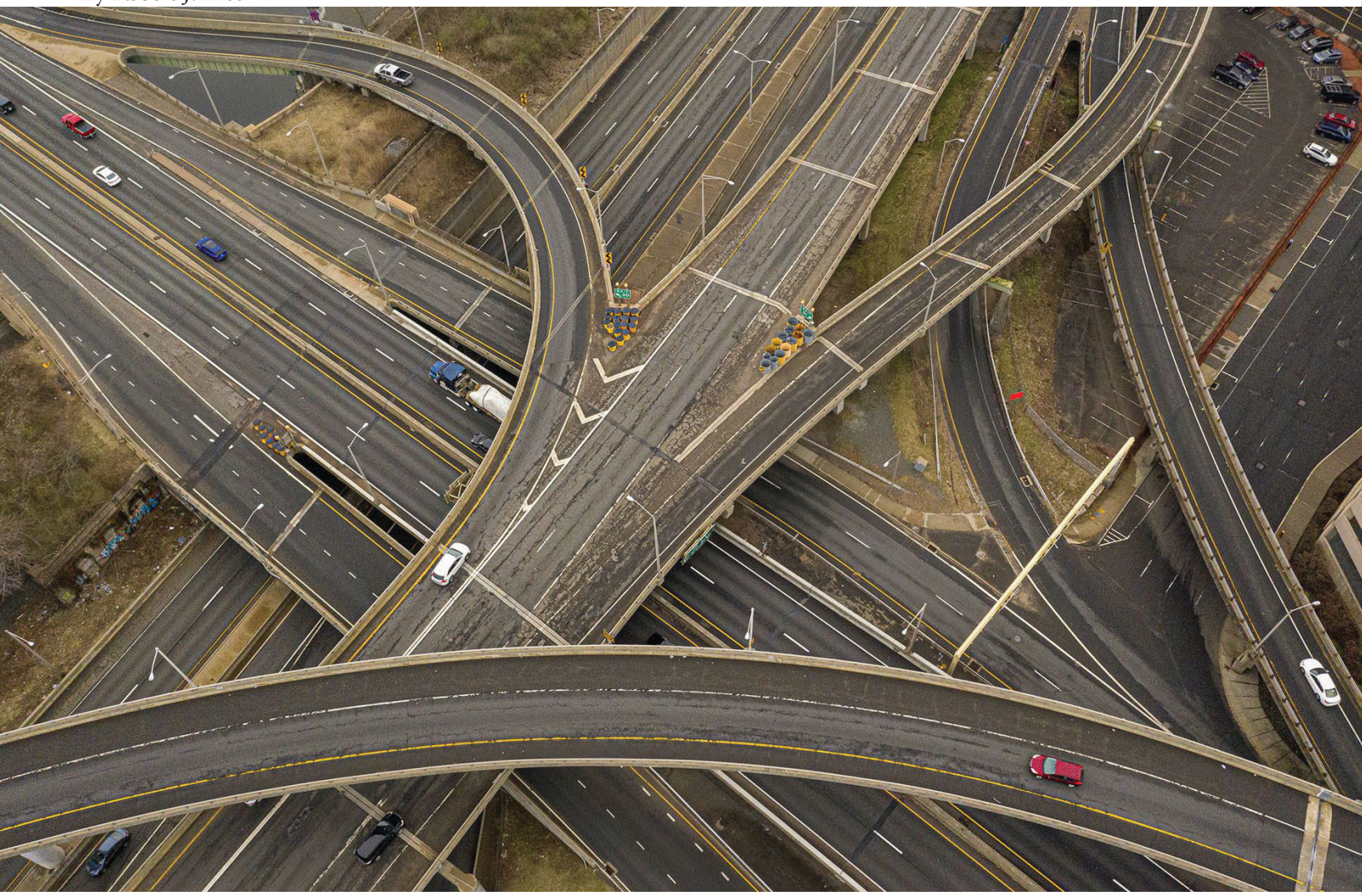
REBUILDING A HOPEFUL FUTURE AFTER A YEAR OF LOSS

By Robert J. Klee



In spring of 2020 at the beginning of the pandemic shutdown, the I-84/I-91 interchange in Hartford is nearly devoid of cars during what would normally be rush hour. Photo: Mark Mirko / Hartford Courant

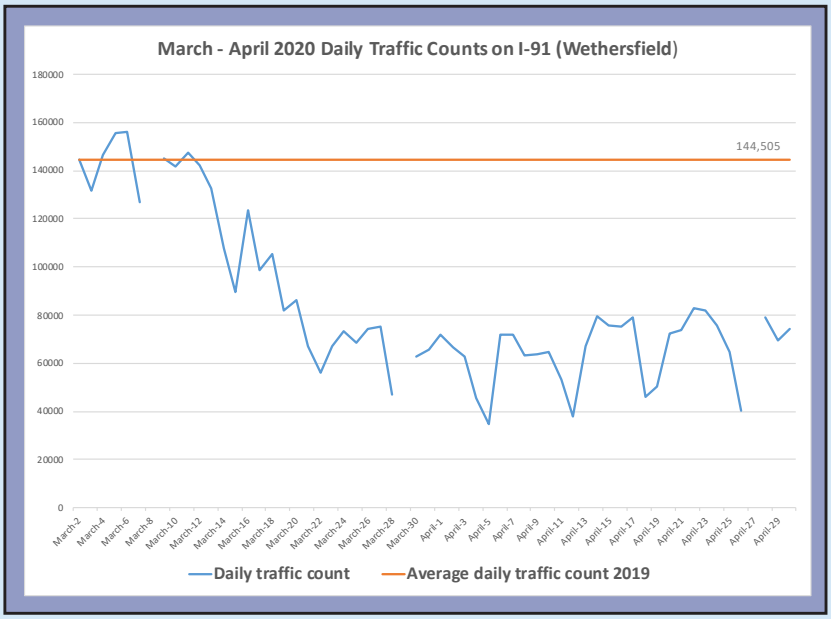
Looking back over the past year of the pandemic, I have trouble wrapping my head around how much we've lost: time spent together, jobs and businesses, our physical and mental health, and, of course, more than 580,000 loved ones and family members in just the United States alone. These are open wounds in our families, lives and communities that will be slow to heal.

Talking about lemonade is almost too hard when the lemon of the past year was so sour, and that taste is still fresh in too many people's lives.

But if we can't stop and reflect on what the pandemic revealed about us, about what mattered, what was really important, we will miss a real opportunity to replace what was lost with something better. I sincerely believe we can use this awful year to envision and build what President Biden's national climate advisor Gina McCarthy calls "a hopeful future," and perhaps in the process begin to tackle the next crisis: global warming.

CLEAR THE AIR WITH CLEAN CARS AND TELECOMMUTING

Let's begin at the beginning, in the spring of 2020, when the world stopped in its tracks. The images from that time were dramatic, as smog-afflicted cities across the world suddenly had clear skies. This happened largely because we stopped driving cars to work and flying in airplanes. As Yale School of the Environment's Ken Gillingham and colleagues found, energy consumption in these two sectors during the height of



Source: Connecticut Department of Transportation

the pandemic dropped by about 30% and 50% respectively.

Of course, a pandemic-induced lockdown and crash of the global economy is no way to clean the air. Still, many of us have now experienced and breathed clean air—some for the first time in our lifetime in our more polluted cities. We essentially ran a real-world experiment on what our transportation system would look like if we could dramatically and rapidly shift to zero emission electric vehicles. A fitting response to a global pandemic that attacked our respiratory system—and disproportionately afflicted urban, minority communities—would be to accelerate the electrification of cars, buses and the rest of our transportation system. Concerted investment in clean transportation will not only address about 40% of our economy-wide greenhouse gas emissions but will also remove local air pollutants such as particulate matter and smog, making every day more like those clear, crisp early clean air days of the pandemic.

The pandemic also upended the workforce, the workplace and our understanding of who are truly essential workers—the first responders, healthcare professionals, delivery workers, grocery workers, sanitation workers and countless others who helped hold our world together as it seemed to fall apart.

But the pandemic also transformed what it means to go to work. The traffic counts around the state dropped by about 40-50%, which around I-84 in Hartford translated to about 70,000 fewer cars on the road each day. Before the pandemic, only about 4% of U.S. employees worked from home. That number rose to more than 50% during the height of the pandemic, or about 70 million people. Private and public employers alike quickly pivoted, and many sectors of the economy kept running through the now ubiquitous Zoom meetings.

Of course, not everyone in the workforce can work from home. According to a recent Pew Research Center Report, about 62% of workers with a bachelor's degree or more education can work from home, compared to only 23% of those without a college degree. About 56% of upper income workers can work from home, compared to about 24% of lower income workers. The pandemic revealed that rural households, and minority and poorer urban households, still find themselves on the wrong side of the digital divide and are more likely to not have broadband access. And we cannot forget that working from home is not always easy, particularly when juggling home schooling and childcare—challenges that fell unevenly on women in the workforce.

As we emerge from the pandemic, many employers are rethinking their need for office space (a major cost to their operations) and are encouraging employees to telecommute for at least part of the work week. By the end of 2021, Global Workplace Analytics estimates that 25-30% of the total U.S. workforce would telecommute multiple days per week, which represents a dramatic reduction of the number of cars on the road. If telecommuting becomes the new normal, we will have achieved significantly lower vehicle emissions through behavioral change faster and more effectively than anyone would have previously thought possible. Now, of course we should pay close attention to the folks who have fled cities, because the classic suburban, two-car lifestyle is not nearly as sustainable as urban living. But the reduction in rush hour traffic from telecommuting will likely be a net positive for the environment and our climate.

REORIENT CITIES TOWARDS PEOPLE, NOT CARS

The pandemic also showed how to reset and re-balance the relationship between cities, cars and ourselves.

Cars have commandeered our cities to the detriment of the people who live there. Urban areas often devote 50-60% of their downtown real estate to roads and parking. Many multi-lane streets cannot easily be crossed by pedestrians, even with traffic lights. Sidewalks have shrunk to the point where two

A sign at the corner of College and Chapel streets in downtown New Haven last summer directs pedestrians away from the sidewalk, where outdoor dining had been expanded, to a closed off portion of the street. Photo: Laura Glesby / New Haven Independent

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Above, Pacifico and South Bay restaurants bustle with customers in the expanded outdoor dining area in downtown New Haven in July 2020. Below left, bartender Raasikh Muhammad mixes a drink at Anchor Spa bar in the outdoor dining area. Right, Alana Dina, left, Craig Holmes and Evongee Smart enjoy guacamole and drinks at at Pacifico restaurant. Photos: Laura Glesby / New Haven Independent

strollers cannot pass each other going in opposite directions.

With cars temporarily out of the picture during the pandemic, cities such as Oakland, Calif., closed their streets to through traffic, to open new opportunities for socially distant walking and active transportation by bicycle, with a particular focus on areas of the city which had lower access to parks and bike lanes. As the Slow Streets movement caught on and disrupted city planning, communities across the country had new, and sometimes challenging, conversations about resetting the relationship between the community and its streets. From Seattle, Wash., to Durham, N.C., and countless places in between, cities are now exploring how to extend these Slow Streets programs beyond the pandemic, to capture the lasting benefits to urban life from simply closing lanes and slowing down cars.

Here in Connecticut, I got a taste of that vibrant, high-quality urban life during the pandemic summer, with the renaissance of outdoor dining. New Haven's Town Green District, in partnership with the City's Department of Transportation, Traffic and Parking, pioneered an effort to reclaim street parking as terraced dining opportunities—taking back some of the car's domain for people. Restaurants and other small businesses also wanted to use more outdoor square footage—from off-street parking and other areas—to safely accommodate patrons and protect their workers for health reasons. But nearly every zoning code in the country requires property owners to devote some minimum amount of their land to parking. Gov. Ned Lamont issued an executive order to suspend those parking requirements for the pandemic, making outdoor dining easier in every community. Post-pandemic, reducing or eliminating parking requirements in our zoning codes has the potential to stimulate development and create more vibrant downtowns and main streets.

Fewer cars clogging our urban roads will also create opportunities for revitalized and rapid bus transit. One of the biggest complaints about the buses, our most common form of public transit, is that they seldom run on time. That is because most buses have to compete with all the single passenger cars on the road. A bus transit system with dedicated lanes, special traffic signals, improved and simplified routes, all the modern amenities including Wi-Fi, good shelters, real time information on arrival times, and zero emission electric drivetrains, are all within reach. Yes, post-pandemic we will have to get people excited about being close together on public transit again. But relatively cheap investments in bus transit systems that work will improve the commuting lives of millions of people, put people to work, and simultaneously help solve our urban pollution and climate problems.

RECONNECT WITH THE NATURAL WORLD

Particularly in its early days, the pandemic quieted the world—literally and figuratively. Scientists call this time the "anthropause"—the "global slowing of modern human activities." Because of that human pause, there were widespread reports of wild animals venturing into more suburban and even urban spaces. With the volume of humans and our activity turned way down, bird song seemed louder, or at least more noticeable.

For many, the pandemic either rekindled or lit anew an appreciation for the natural world. In nature, we collectively sought solace during a time of immeasurable loss, freedom from feeling stuck indoors, and recharge from seemingly never-ending Zoom calls.

By all accounts, our state and local parks, trails, and nature preserves were full: CT DEEP reported that residents went outdoors in "extraordinary" numbers, and Eric Hammerling, executive director of the Connecticut Forest and Park Association, saw state trail usage increase "tremendously." Backyard birdfeeder sales skyrocketed, and the National Audubon Society promoted birding as a fun, socially distant hobby that connected people to nature.

But many people, myself included, also just took walks in the neighborhood, appreciating the local, not-so-wild world around us.

I draw three key lessons from our re-discovery of the natural world during the pandemic. First, spending time in nature has been shown to improve health, reduce stress, and promote healing. We should actively promote time outdoors as a critical part of a healthy, well-balanced lifestyle, and part of the antidote to the pandemic—and in so doing we will hopefully create a new generation of environmental stewards.

Second, our natural world and our local parks both need care and maintenance. Unfortunately funding for parks and natural spaces has been in decline for decades at the federal, state and local levels. But there are a few signs of hope. Just before the pandemic hit, Congress permanently reauthorized the Land & Water Conservation Fund, which finances conservation programs at the state and local level. And, the various coronavirus relief bills contain funds that communities could use to support parks.

These and other types of investments in our parks and natural spaces put people to work, stimulate economic activity

The Klee family poses for a selfie while on a hike at Nehantic State Forest in Lyme in August 2020. Photo: Robert J. Klee

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Everett Williams, in foreground, plays with his older brothers Declan, center, and Maddox at Toby May Park in New London in May. The need for more investment in parks is one of the insights to emerge from the COVID pandemic shutdown. Photo: Judy Benson

and can create lasting benefits for humans and natural ecosystems, including sequestering carbon dioxide and reducing urban heat islands (where pavement, buildings and other infrastructure elevate outdoor temperatures).

Third, we must confront the fact that not everyone has equal access to parks and natural spaces. A special report by The Trust for Public Land on parks and the pandemic highlighted the fact that more than 100 million people, including 28 million children, do not have a park within a 10-minute walk from home. Any concerted effort on improving access to nature must be centered around correcting past injustice and must have outdoor equity as a key metric of success.

STAY HOPEFUL

My pandemic year reaffirmed the interconnectedness of our world, the importance of leadership, the value of science and discovery, and the centrality of family and community. Coming out of this year of immeasurable loss, I still remain hopeful about our future, and the opportunity to take the hard lessons learned and apply them towards making the world a better place.

Links to the articles and sources cited in this article can be found at: https://seagrant.uconn.edu/?p=7495