

The long commute soon won't make sense

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Joseph Staniunas Jr. explained why, in his drive from Roanoke to Radford, the commute still makes sense ("The commute still makes sense," May 1 commentary). While I'm uncritical of his decision, that he's written this commentary at all illustrates the perception that with historically high gasoline prices, many commutes are making increasingly less sense. Let's explore why a commute like his formerly made sense, makes less sense now, and whether and for how long it will continue to make sense.

Virtually all transportation in America today is powered by petroleum, the densest, most convenient and most portable fuel on the planet. Domestic U.S. production of petroleum historically follows a statistical bell-shaped curve, rising from almost nothing in 1900 to a billion barrels per year around 1930 and peaking at just more than 3 billion barrels per year in 1970. Domestic production has been in terminal decline since, and no amount of new exploration or drilling will reverse that trend. We have augmented the shortfall by increasing our imports, and in doing so are now funding both sides of the war on terrorism.

During the last 100 years, but particularly since World War II, we have enjoyed a bounty of seemingly unlimited, cheap petroleum. Sure, there were temporary fluctuations like the OPEC oil embargoes of the 1970s, to which we were particularly vulnerable because of the aforementioned domestic peak in 1970. But for all but our oldest citizens, cheap gasoline has been as constant and dependable as gravity.

We have responded by completely re-engineering our cities, towns and rural spaces not around the needs of people, but around the needs of the automobile. We have allowed our inner cities to atrophy, many of our rail and transit systems to collapse entirely, and our industrial, retail and commercial "parks" and residential areas to sprawl across millions of acres of former woodland and farmland. For most of us, it has become impossible to get from home to anywhere we need or want to go without a car. In other words, we rebuilt our communities around the notion of \$25-a-barrel oil. Today oil is selling for around \$115 a barrel, and barring a worldwide depression where nobody can afford to buy it, the price will never approach \$25 a barrel again.

Furthermore, we've moved ourselves 20, 50, sometimes 100 miles from work. We did this because we could, because with plentiful and affordable energy it made sense. Commutes like Staniunas' would have been unheard of 50 years ago but are commonplace now.

Production peaks of all fixed resources can only be known for certain in hindsight. But evidence indicates that we are either near or just past the worldwide peak of oil. There are no viable alternatives poised to step in and allow our happy motoring lifestyles to continue. The other fossil fuels (coal, natural gas, oil shales, etc.) have serious technical challenges as automobile fuels, are already being consumed at record levels and face their own impending peaks. Electric and hydrogen vehicles on a mass scale are decades away if they will ever be truly feasible.

The result seems inevitable and predictable: rapid and dramatic price escalations (read: doubling or tripling gasoline prices) and recurring shortages (read: long queues at the pump and even potential rationing). And because of the increasing competition from consumers in China, India, Southeast Asia and elsewhere, our fledgling conservation efforts will have only a meager effect in delaying peak.

The impending shocks to our economic system are incalculable. There's a huge difference in paying \$50 a week for gasoline and paying \$150 for our weekly ration and having to wait two hours for the privilege. At that point, for increasing numbers of us, long commutes will never make sense again. Millions of us will simply need to fashion other arrangements from a paltry pool of options. The ways we eat, shop and recreate will change radically as well.

In short, we have built for ourselves a transportation and development paradigm that has no future. And as painful as we will find this to be, the realization has yet to register with either the motoring public or our civic leaders. For instance, plans are still under serious consideration to build Interstate 73 and widen Interstate 81 along much of its length, basing traffic projections on past trends rather than future eventualities. The prevailing mind-set and misdirected allocation of resources continues.

Staniunas' commute, like that of millions of the rest of us, makes sense for now. But it won't for much longer, and we'd be wise to start planning for that day.