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# Hartford

## The Daily Jam

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## TAKING A DIFFERENT ROUTE

# CREATIVE COMMUTES

Back Roads, Biking, Flex Hours — Anything To Beat The Traffic

By **LEONARD FELSON**

**C**arolyn Mason, a 23-year-old systems engineer at Pratt & Whitney, has figured a way to beat the stress of commuting to work in metro Hartford. She bikes. Fifteen minutes from her Glastonbury home to her East Hartford office. Rain, snow or shine. She does have a car, “but I only use it,” says Mason, “when I have to be somewhere immediately after work.”

Meet the growing movement of commuters seeking creative ways to deal with traffic and the hassles of getting around the Capitol region — 1,047 square miles big, population 974,000, covering 30 towns and cities.

Besides using traditional carpools, innovative residents are discovering new ways to avoid traffic congestion. One is to make more flexible hours than the 9-to-5 workday, using “flex hours,” to drive before or after rush hour.

A Friday evening traffic backup in Southington, near the Marion Avenue exit off I-84. |

BRAD HARRIGAN

Another is telecommuting a few days or more a week, growing more popular thanks to laptops, smart phones and other technology such as smart boards and web meetings. And yet another is relying on CT Transit buses or CTfastrak, the region’s first rapid transit bus line, usage of which has exceeded all expectations, transit officials say.

Creative commuting has become a greater necessity, commuters and regional experts say, because the needed solutions to a more efficient infrastructure are years away, if ever. Traffic congestion on the worst bottleneck, I-84 from downtown Hartford west to Farmington, a 7-mile stretch, won’t improve anytime soon. That’s partly because alternatives to the I-84 viaduct, an elevated-2-mile stretch running through Hartford, won’t be completed until the late 2020s, at best. An estimated 175,000 vehicles drive over that viaduct daily, a number more than three times what it was built to accommodate, and one accident can back up traffic for miles.

Other structural problems may never be solved, such as the absence of ring roads or a beltway encircling the capital city, a design element originally assumed to be part of the I-84/I-91 interstate system. Another is

a grid system that would include arterial roads crossing the Connecticut River, which could ease pressure on the highways.

“The only way to get from Hartford to East Hartford is to get on the freeway,” says Lyle Wray, head of the Capitol Region Council of Governments. Unlike cities such as Pittsburgh, where three rivers meet and which has multiple crossings, Hartford has no other roads with bridges, “and it causes huge bottlenecks, as a result,” says Wray.

The lack of easy-to-navigate arterial roads throughout the region is also what can cause traffic jams near downtown Hartford that stretch to Exit 37 in Windsor Center, 9 miles north, says Thomas Maziarz, head of the state transportation department’s policy and planning bureau.

To avoid such traffic jams, Maziarz himself uses flex hours, leaving his Windsor Locks home around 7 a.m. to get to DOT offices on the Berlin Turnpike in Newington. Doing that allows him to take advantage of what he calls “the shoulders of the peak.”

Since CTfastrak opened in 2015, the 9.4-mile stretch, with 10 stations between downtown Hartford and New Britain, has attracted more than 7.5 million riders, transportation

officials say. It has also put the region in the spotlight nationally: Because of CTfastrak, the region now ranks among the top 10 for greatest increase in access to jobs. That means, for example, a Hartford resident, who once relied on a patchwork of CTtransit buses to get to a job at a Target store in New Britain, can now get to work a lot more easily than before.

“It’s a massively improved transit experience,” says Wray, “From an hour-and-a-half to 20 minutes — that’s a big deal.”

Since August, a new CTtransit bus began running hourly from the University of Connecticut in Storrs to its downtown Hartford campus, with stops in Mansfield, Tolland and Manchester.

An even more radical way to fight the battle: Move closer to work to eliminate the commute entirely, a trend increasingly popular among millennials.

That describes Nick Addamo, a 25-year-old urban planner at CDM Smith in East Hartford. He moved to 777 Main St. in downtown Hartford, the former Bank of America building converted into apartments more than a year ago. A typical morning starts at 7:45 a.m., when he leaves his building, walks past State House Square and Constitution Plaza, crosses the Founders Bridge along the pedestrian promenade over the Connecticut River, walks down a set of steps to East River Drive in East Hartford, and arrives at his office one block away at Founders Plaza. Fifteen minutes, door-to-door, and energized, Addamo says.

In the winter, he dresses for the weather. “If it’s really inclement,” Addamo says, “I take the No. 87 bus on Market Street in front of the Brazilian consulate and get off on Pitkin Street.” That trip takes five minutes.

## GIRDING FOR GRIDLOCK

# Stuck In A Jam

## HOW THEY PASS THE TIME

By **KELLY VAUGHAN**

*If there is one thing that every driver experiences, it is the inevitable traffic jam. Whether you anticipate the daily morning highway rush or get backed up by lengthy construction projects, traffic jams are frustrating and sometimes unpredictable. Rather than hitting their steering wheels over and over again, here’s how these Connecticut residents make their unexpectedly long drive a bit more manageable.*



### Tunes In Traffic

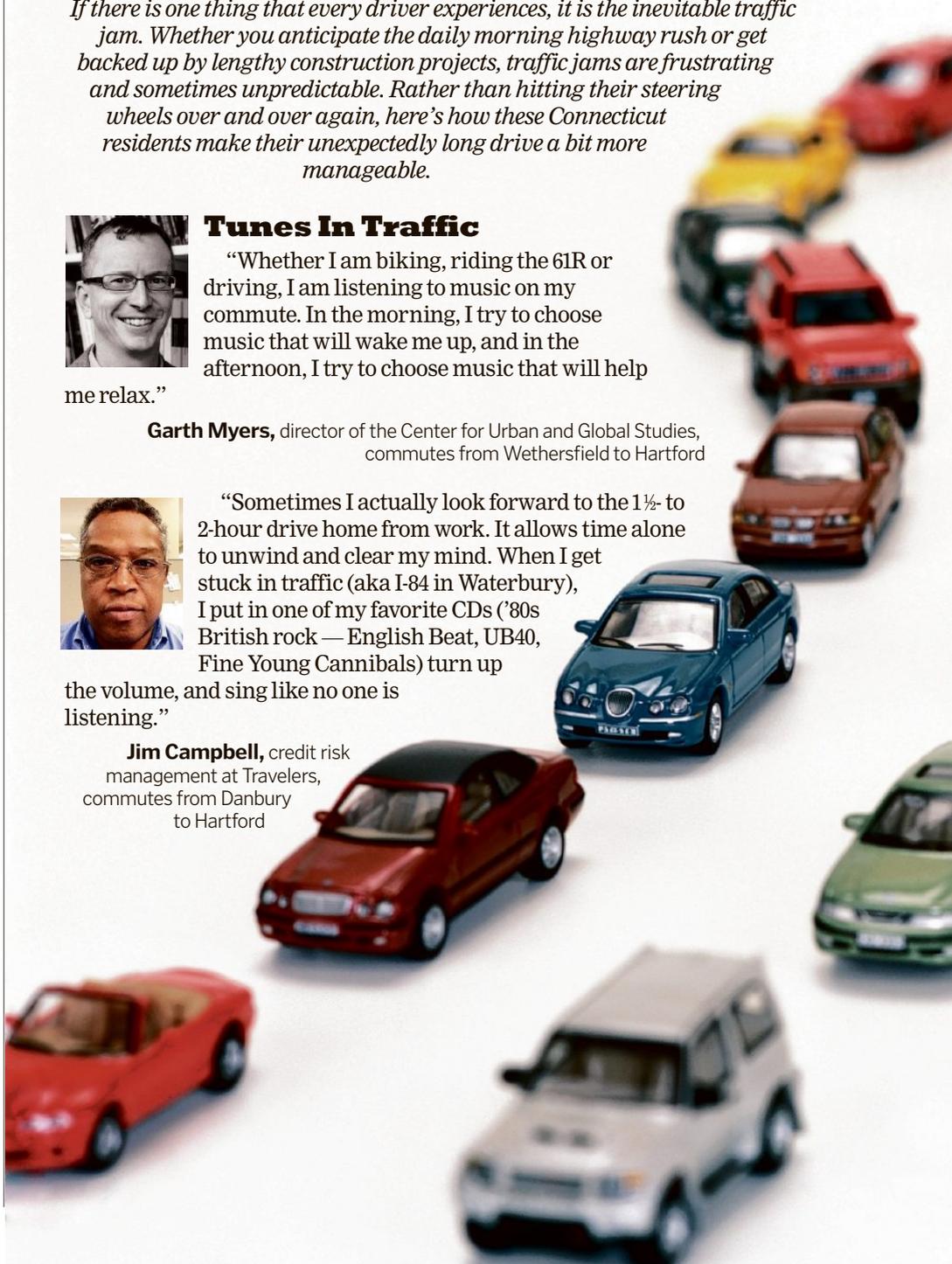
“Whether I am biking, riding the 61R or driving, I am listening to music on my commute. In the morning, I try to choose music that will wake me up, and in the afternoon, I try to choose music that will help me relax.”

**Garth Myers**, director of the Center for Urban and Global Studies, commutes from Wethersfield to Hartford



“Sometimes I actually look forward to the 1½- to 2-hour drive home from work. It allows time alone to unwind and clear my mind. When I get stuck in traffic (aka I-84 in Waterbury), I put in one of my favorite CDs (’80s British rock — English Beat, UB40, Fine Young Cannibals) turn up the volume, and sing like no one is listening.”

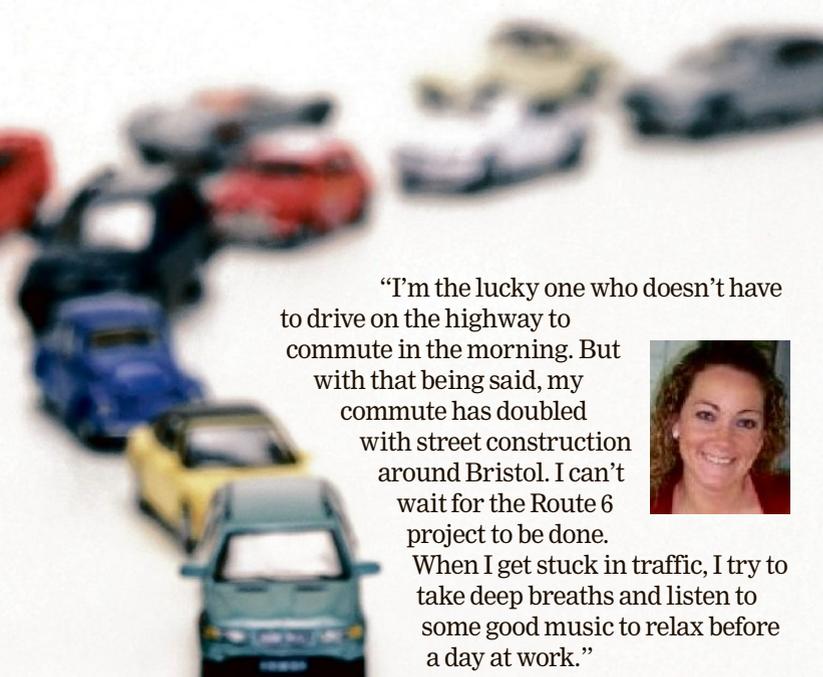
**Jim Campbell**, credit risk management at Travelers, commutes from Danbury to Hartford





“When I’m in serious traffic, you’ll almost always find me blasting Celine Dion’s ‘That’s the Way It Is.’ At first there was no real significance... it was just one of my favorite songs to jam to. But the lyrics literally say, ‘When you want it the most, there’s no easy way out,’ and that completely sums up how I feel trying to get off of I-84 after work.”

**Hannah Davis**, engagement analyst at the University of Connecticut Foundation Inc., commutes from Hartford to Storrs



“I’m the lucky one who doesn’t have to drive on the highway to commute in the morning. But with that being said, my commute has doubled with street construction around Bristol. I can’t wait for the Route 6 project to be done. When I get stuck in traffic, I try to take deep breaths and listen to some good music to relax before a day at work.”



**Melissa Prentiss**, elementary school teacher for Bristol Public Schools, commutes from Bristol

### Global Focus

“More than half of my commute is usually spent on the phone speaking with colleagues at the restaurants [in Greenwich, Southport and West Hartford]. I do not text. When I’m not talking on the phone, I listen to language learning CDs. In winter, I listen to Spanish learning CDs and in the spring, I listen to German learning CDs. One problem is that I am not always focused because I am thinking about work. Just about everyone speaks Spanish in the kitchen and I would like to speak with everyone more fluently. I can definitely comprehend more than I can express, but I am working on it. I switch to the German learning CDs around March because my in-laws are German and they come to visit us each spring.”



**Frederic Kieffer**, executive chef at Artisan and L’Escale, commutes from Fairfield

## Highway Headlines

“My commute starts at an ungodly hour ... so, a to-go mug with hot tea or coffee — paired with WCBS 880AM — seems to keep me awake, alert, and helps me prepare for my morning (before I even get to the station). If it’s a “slow” morning in the news/traffic department, I’ll switch over to an audiobook or podcast.”



**Nicole Nalepa**, news and traffic anchor at WFSB-TV, Channel 3 Eyewitness News

“When I’m stuck in the car for a long drive I use that time to soak up as much NPR as I can because I like to stay informed about what’s going on in the world. There’s so much news from every corner of the globe that it takes my mind off how long I’ve been in traffic.”



**Molly Thoms**, program coordinator at Trinity College’s Office of Spiritual and Religious Life, commutes from West Hartford to Hartford

“My commute from West Hartford to Hartford is real short, just about 10 to 15 minutes. I’m a big podcast guy with music, sports and the news. I like to start those each morning. On the way home, I’ll either continue podcasts or listen to Sirius — I’m a fan of Channel 36 Alt Nation.”



**Ritchie Shane**, investment accounting consultant at Aetna, commutes from West Hartford to Hartford

## Bottlenecks: How They Rank

Rankings reflect the worst spots to be stuck in 2016. Called truck high congestion locations, these don’t



include bottlenecks on arterial roads in cities and towns throughout the region.

1. West Hartford to Hartford, I-84
2. Hartford, I-84
3. Berlin to Newington, U.S. Route 5
4. Hartford near Charter Oak Bridge, I-91

SOURCE: Connecticut Department of Transportation, National Performance Management Data Set