zoom

Real-time traffic data would warn drivers of heavily congested streets, such as this one in New York City.
Photo credit: STAN HONDA/AFP/NEWSCOM

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

Obstacles block real-time traffic data in U.S.

Harry Stoffer | | **Automotive News** / June 26, 2006 - 6:00 am

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WASHINGTON -- In January, the Acura RL won the inaugural Tech Car of the Year award from CNET.com, a popular Web site for fans of cutting-edge technology.

One reason for the award was the car's navigation system -- the first in the industry to provide real-time traffic data as a standard feature.

The system displays icons where crashes and other incidents occur. It has color-coding for roadways, to show how freely traffic is flowing. In theory, if you see a problem on your route, you pick an alternative.

But there is a glitch that isn't the system's fault: Real-time traffic information is limited and spotty.

Real-time information is available in 31 U.S. metropolitan areas, about a third of the U.S. metro areas with at least 500,000 people. The data generally come only from major highways in those areas. Even in Los Angeles, which has one of the best systems, just about 60 percent of roadways are covered.

Filling the gaps

A new group, which includes representatives of three automakers, has formed to try to fill the gaps. It's called the Vehicle Traffic Information Coalition. Its mission is to have high-quality, low-cost, real-time traffic information available for every American road.

But members recognize that realization of that objective will be neither immediate nor likely very cheap.

"We're all feeling our way," says Ed Cohen, vice president of government and industry relations for Honda North America Inc. **(honda.com),** an organizer of the coalition.

That remark followed a coalition meeting last month, at which a key congressional staffer appeared to dampen members' enthusiasm. Graham Hill said there is little chance that lawmakers are ready to earmark taxpayer money for the network the coalition seeks. Hill is Republican staff director of the highways subcommittee of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee **(house.gov/transportation).**

Mike Kanger, the coalition's coordinator, says the cost of the network has not been nailed down. But he concedes it could reach hundreds of millions of dollars, although probably not billions.

Much of the spending would equip more roads with such principal data sources as sensors and cameras. Other, possibly more economical, ways of monitoring traffic could be on the horizon.

The coalition has reasons for hope, says Kanger, director of legislative affairs for the Washington consulting firm e-Copernicus **(e-copernicus.com),** which specializes in transportation and telecommunications issues.

Kanger notes that Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta last month called traffic congestion one of the most serious threats to the nation's economy. He outlined a plan to begin tackling it.

Last August, Congress and President Bush enacted a multiyear, $290 billion transportation spending blueprint. It has a provision that enables state and local governments to use their shares of federal highway money on such projects as real-time traffic data collection and dissemination, Kanger says.

Most state and local governments already have long lists of projects -- usually highway paving and bridge construction -- that have been waiting for federal aid.

Get real

These 31 metro areas have real-time traffic data for in-vehicle navigation.

1. Atlanta
2. Baltimore
3. Boston
4. Chicago
5. Cincinnati
6. Cleveland
7. Dallas/Ft. Worth
8. Denver
9. Detroit
10. Houston
11. Los Angeles
12. Miami/Ft. Lauderdale
13. Milwaukee
14. Minneapolis/St. Paul
15. New York City
16. Orlando, Fla.
17. Philadelphia
18. Phoenix
19. Pittsburgh
20. Portland
21. Providence
22. Sacramento
23. San Antonio

24. San Diego
25. San Francisco/Oakland
26. San Jose
27. Seattle
28. St. Louis
29. Tampa
30. Washington, D.C.
31. Wilmington, Del.
Source: XM NavTraffic

What is time worth?

But Tony Kane, who represents state highway officials, says projects designed to relieve congestion are not out of the running for money.

Motorists are demanding relief from traffic jams, says Kane, director of engineering and technical services for the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials **(aashto.org).**

Half of traffic congestion in urban areas, Kane says, occurs because of crashes or breakdowns, not because too many vehicles are traveling at a given time. Congestion mitigation is "an evolving area that people are finding more and more important," he told *Automotive News*.

Spending money to prevent or overcome congestion makes even more sense when people consider how much being stuck in traffic costs them in lost productivity and wasted gasoline, adds Harry Voccola. He is senior vice president of government and industry relations for NAVTEQ Corp. **(navteq.com),** another organizer of the Vehicle Traffic Information Coalition.

NAVTEQ, of Chicago, supplies digital maps to the auto industry and others. It also packages traffic data that, in the case of the Acura RL, get fed through the XM Satellite Radio system **(xmradio.com)** and onto the navigation screen. The main provider of the data is Traffic.com.

Voccola says estimates of the social cost of congestion range from $75 billion to $200 billion a year. Other detriments, such as incidents of road rage, add intangibly to the toll. So even hundreds of millions of dollars for improved traffic data might be a good trade-off, he suggests

Voccola notes that more economical ways of collecting data are under development. Electronic "probes" in vehicles can signal where they are. Some researchers also are looking at using vehicle occupants' mobile phone signals to measure traffic flow.

He would not predict when real-time traffic data will be available coast to coast.

Meanwhile, real-time information such as that in the Acura RL is helpful but "embryonic" and prone to "abnormalities," says Rik Paul, automotive editor of *Consumer Reports* **(consumerreports.org),** published by the nonprofit Consumers Union.

The magazine hasn't done comprehensive testing of real-time systems, but Paul drove the RL for awhile. He told *Automotive News* the car's system is "a good starting point" that "brings navigation into another era."

Wayne Cunningham, senior car tech editor of CNET, which made the RL its Tech Car of the Year, is optimistic about emerging traffic technology. But he says he is realistic about its ultimate limitations.

Notes Cunningham, who works in San Francisco: "If you see the Bay Bridge is moving slowly … there is not really any other way to go."

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Coalition of the willing

Automakers in the Vehicle Traffic Information Coalition	
Honda North America Inc.	
Toyota Motor North America Inc.	
Volkswagen of America Inc.	
Other coalition members and their products or services	
ESRI Inc.	software for digital maps
Inrix Inc.	traffic data and analysis
NAVTEQ Corp.	digital maps
Mark IV Industries Inc.	information displays, traffic management tools
TCS Inc.	information networks
Tele Atlas North America Inc.	mapping databases
Traffic.com Inc.	traffic data
XM Satellite Radio Holdings Inc.	satellite radio
Source: Vehicle Traffic Information Coalition	