

Mr. Speaker, a livable community is one where families are safe, healthy and economically secure. While much attention is given to the damage that unplanned growth can have to the physical environment, the physical blight, traffic congestion, loss of open space, wildlife habitat, it is clear that a community that is not livable can also have direct impacts on the physical and psychological health of families as well.

Just this week, the South Coast Air Quality Management District in Southern California released a report documenting the danger to people breathing the toxic air that is concentrated near southern California's congested freeways. This danger has increased the risk of cancer. People today are increasingly concerned about the soaring rates of asthma among our children which clearly appears related to the toxins we are putting into the air.

Recently, there was an article that I found amusing in the Washington Post, about how some people really enjoy the real long commute. It helps them center themselves and prepare for a long day.

I suppose that may be true for some, but when the average American spends more than 50 work days a year trapped behind the wheel of a car, just getting to and from their occupation, and when we have lost 43 more hours in the last 5 years to commuting, there are direct implications. I would venture that for a much larger number the commute to work is not the highlight of their day.

The National Sleep Foundation has reported that the 158 hours added to the yearly work commutes since 1969 have been subtracted from the time many Americans sleep. Carol Rodriguez, director of the Institute of Stress Medicine in Norwalk, Connecticut, observed that people with lengthy commutes often exhibit signs of stress in the workplace.

Marriage and family counselors in the Bay Area see patients struggling with the increased demands and stress placed upon them from their longer work commutes. This struggle is manifesting itself in family problems and even divorce. It has been noted that divorce itself is no longer a reliever to the stress of long commutes and separation because often, after a family breaks up, the difficulties of two households in coordinating the needs of children and employment are usually greater in terms of time and miles driven to hold things together.

The job-related problems where employers increasingly, in congested communities, never seem to know when their employees are going to show up, seems tame by comparison.

One of the most interesting developments may be found in a report from the Center for Disease Control and prevention on increasing obesity rates in the United States. Rates have been increasing since 1991 all across America, but there was particular concern about an increase of over 101 percent in Georgia.

In 1991, when the study began, metropolitan Atlanta had one of the lowest obesity rates. What is the reason for the increase? Some blame the traditional southern diet, which it is true is often high in fat, but the South's diet is not that much different than the rest of the country today. In any case, it certainly does not explain why Georgia has the worst problem than the rest of the South.

It is interesting that the researcher placed part of the blame on the problems that metropolitan Atlanta is facing as the community has become less and less livable. The skyrocketing obesity rates coincide exactly with the explosion of unplanned growth around metropolitan Atlanta which some claim is the highest growth rate in history.

Dr. William Deats, one of the study's co-authors, points out that the time in the car encourages not just more fast food, it eats into the time for exercise. Others have noticed that Atlanta's unplanned growth has shortchanged the opportunities for outdoor exercise. It is not a walkable community. Sidewalks do not lead anywhere and even if people had the time and a place to exercise, the increasingly bad air makes the benefits of exercise problematic.

It is important for us to reflect on why the political landscape is being influenced by the discussion of livable communities and why it is such a major issue. It seems at some level the American public understands that their health, both emotional and physical, of the family, the ability to be fit, reduce stress, adequate sleep and for the family to live together is one of the first casualties if a community is not livable.

I strongly urge my colleagues to join with me in making sure that this session of Congress does its job for the Federal Government to be a better partner in maintaining and enhancing the livability of American communities.