

# What's Behind the Nonsense About Traffic Gridlock in Canada?

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*There is no evidence of a traffic gridlock event ever occurring in Canada, and yet the term appears in news media stories, politicians' announcements and pronouncements, government documents, and media releases by boards of trade and agents of the automotive and development industries. This brief commentary draws on recent research into the connections between traffic gridlock, vested interests and motives, and asks "What is going on here?" Readers are invited to send notes about the gridlock-vested interest-motive experience in their regions, as well as related references and website links, to [wellarb@uottawa.ca](mailto:wellarb@uottawa.ca).*

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*This article was prepared for news media, popular literature, list serve, social media, academic and association websites, and other means of communicating with the general public in Canada and abroad.*

*Background reports on the topics of traffic gridlock and traffic congestion may be viewed at the following sites: [transport2000.ca/](http://transport2000.ca/); [wellar.ca/wellarconsulting/](http://wellar.ca/wellarconsulting/); [urbanneighbourhoods.wordpress.com/](http://urbanneighbourhoods.wordpress.com/); and [slideshare.net/wellarb/documents](http://slideshare.net/wellarb/documents).*

Based on the available evidence, there has never been a “traffic gridlock” event of any significance anywhere in Canada.

There have been traffic jams, intersection blockages, etc., but traffic gridlock in which block after block after block of city streets are totally paralyzed and vehicles cannot go forwards, backwards, or sideways within the street grid has never happened in Canada, never, not even once.

Why, then, if there has never been a noteworthy traffic gridlock event in the history of Canada, does the term appear with regularity in news media stories, editorials, columns, and special reports, as well as in news releases by boards of trade and chambers of commerce, in pronouncements by municipal, provincial, and federal politicians, and in claims and dire predictions by members and supporters of the motor vehicle, road building, and development industries?

Moreover, as further testimony to its bizarre popularity, the term was used 51 times during two days of Hearings of the Government of Ontario Standing Committee on General Government - Traffic congestion, in June, 2012.

However, to emphatically underline the popularity versus evidence gap, not even one of the participants in the Hearings produced evidence to support contentions about traffic gridlock, and requests for evidence since the hearings have drawn a total blank.

What is going on here?

It has been known for hundreds of years that traffic congestion in urban areas is a natural condition. That is, if an area is urbanized then by definition it is congested, and if it is not congested then it is rural. This is not rocket science.

So, the question arises: What induces seemingly informed individuals and representatives of political parties, government agencies, corporations, and organizations to base their arguments on a term which they must surely know is logical and operational nonsense?

After numerous analyses into the technical aspects of measuring congestion and defining traffic gridlock, and finding no empirical evidence of traffic gridlock events, my focus shifted to questions about motivation.

Specifically, what could be the reasons behind using a term which at best is a bad, misleading metaphor, and which hinders rather than helps understanding the role of congestion in planning and developing more sustainable, accessible, and financially-sensible urban regions?

In a recent paper, *Tracking the Motives behind the Phony War on “Traffic Gridlock”*, I identified about 50 motives, such as scaremongering, pandering to ideology, serving vested interests, influencing outcomes, creating false impressions, and twisting perceptions. The full list can be viewed at [http://www.transport-action.ca/dc/Wellar\\_Gridlock2012.pdf](http://www.transport-action.ca/dc/Wellar_Gridlock2012.pdf).

One motive in particular, influencing outcomes, caught the attention of many readers, prompting suggestions that I describe how this motive could be a driving force behind using a term which amounts to a pile of nonsense. The following example serves that purpose.

On the one hand, the large, politically-connected vested interest group comprised of the motor vehicle, road building, and development industries has a huge stake in retaining the transportation status quo which has prevailed in Canada since the 1960s.

That is, they want to maintain the primacy of the private motor vehicle for moving people and freight within and between cities, and one way of doing this is by spreading the traffic gridlock doom-and-gloom story at every opportunity, and applying pressure through news items, annual reports, public presentations, communications to politicians, communications through politicians, etc., to build and expand highways, roads, bridges, ramps, etc.

And, on the other hand, these same industries and their supporters have a huge stake in minimizing any shifts in the direction of alternative transportation for people – walking, cycling, transit, and rail passenger –, or increased movement of freight by rail.

This outcome is achieved by means such as cutting alternative transportation services, letting infrastructure degrade or become obsolete, and postponing repairs, usually in the name of cost savings, which in turn are put into highway and road budgets to keep private motor vehicles rolling to the benefit of the motor vehicle, road building, and development industries at taxpayer expense.

Similar comments apply to numerous other motives, that is, claims about traffic gridlock have everything to do with vested interests and money, and little or nothing to do with transportation systems that best serve the public interest when it comes to mobility of people, movement of goods, and the intelligent planning and development of our built environment.

Because of the money factor the vested interest crowd will no doubt continue to play the traffic gridlock card, and politicians and political parties with connections to the motor vehicle, land development, and road-building industries will continue to do likewise.

However, I am optimistic that Canadian good sense will prevail and begin to resoundingly reject that nonsense notion and its proponents.

And, I am also optimistic that organizations such as Transport Action Canada, the Federation of Urban Neighbourhoods, the Canadian Institute of Planners, and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities will take the lead in furthering research and education projects and programs to better understand and appreciate both the positive and the negative aspects of traffic congestion.

In the companion report, ***Transportation Question Begs for an Answer: What's Behind the Nonsense about Traffic Gridlock in Canada?***, I discuss parts of this article in detail, with an emphasis on “burying” the nonsense notion of traffic gridlock, and moving on to the much more significant topic of traffic congestion.

***Transportation Question Begs for an Answer: What's Behind the Nonsense about Traffic Gridlock in Canada?*** is nearing completion, and will be published in early 2013. Following past practices, it will be posted on several websites, including [transport2000.ca](http://transport2000.ca); [wellar.ca/wellarconsulting/](http://wellar.ca/wellarconsulting/); [urbanneighbourhoods.wordpress.com/](http://urbanneighbourhoods.wordpress.com/); and [slideshare.net/wellarb/documents](http://slideshare.net/wellarb/documents)