

Effects of Rural Highway Bypasses on Small Agricultural Communities

Heidi L. Hoffman

College of Food, Agricultural and Natural Resource Sciences
University of Minnesota – Twin Cities

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Dr. Garrett M. Steede

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Introduction

When it comes to construction, almost everyone always dreads the inconvenience it causes. Detours, slowdowns, and increased traffic patrol just add to driver's frustrations and oftentimes it seems the work itself will never get done. Although construction can be inconvenient at the time, oftentimes the wait is well worth it and traffic flow is improved as a result. Typically, this is the main goal that highway bypasses are attempting to accomplish. By constructing highway bypasses, traffic can be diverted from congested areas or reduced speed limits through small towns, allowing drivers to get to their destination faster than ever before. Time management has evolved over the past decades and, nowadays, time is of the essence; every extra five minutes not spent in traffic is five minutes that can be spent elsewhere on more important things. However, it is important to keep in mind both the positive and negative impacts that these highway bypasses can have on the small, and oftentimes agricultural, communities that are getting bypassed and subsequently having less visitors. Although highway bypasses are often faster and arguably safer, they can also limit small communities' viability in the future due to diverted traffic which can lead to lower overall sales for business districts, population, and overall economic progress (Srinivasan & Kockelman, 2002).

After smaller towns get bypassed by newly constructed, larger state highways, oftentimes they quickly become an afterthought for drivers. What once were bustling little towns are now not much louder than a ghost town. Depending on the town, this could be a good or bad end result. When it comes to highway bypasses, there is a big tradeoff that needs to be considered before construction begins: "What is more important - increased drive times for state highway commuters or the economic impact that bypasses have on small businesses within these small towns?". Overall safety is very important as well, but neither choice is always the safer option.

Literature Review

People often question all types of construction, including highway bypasses, and wonder, “Why even build this in the first place?”. The short answer to that question is that highway bypasses help eliminate traffic backups and improve drive times, especially for people with occupations such as commercial truck drivers (“Bypass Basics”, 2014). Oftentimes, when driving through smaller towns that are between larger cities, drivers find themselves having to slow down, which can make their commute take longer overall. In fact, “Major state highways are often the main street in small and medium-sized communities.” (“Bypass Basics”, 2014, p.2). These main streets are often the heart of these small towns and are the most likely area to contain the most people, which is why these slowdowns are there in the first place – to ensure safety.

The situation of highway bypasses affects all developing states and countries. Right now, current southern Minnesota residents are experiencing this reality firsthand as the expansion of Highway 14 from New Ulm to Rochester will be underway come spring of 2022 (Fischenich, 2022). This project involves expanding the state highway to four lanes and the bypassing of the small town of Courtland, MN that Highway 14 currently runs straight through (Fischenich, 2022). The purpose of this highway project is to eliminate dangerous intersections, slowdowns and accidents in Courtland, and increase overall drive times across most of the southern half of Minnesota (Fischenich, 2022). Aside from the local level, we also see this taking place on a global level. The rural town of Perth, Tasmania was in the same shoes as Courtland, MN just a few years ago. They found that after their new bypass was put into place, they saw an overall decreased amount of traffic on their main street, their businesses lost sales, and they experienced noisiness coming from the bypass, which is ironically often listed as a positive impact that is expected to come out of highway bypasses as they are supposed to help eliminate traffic noise in

congested areas (McLennan, 2020). On a positive note, however, the small town found that after some time, their lives did return to a new normal as they increased their advertisements of their businesses along the new highway and saw how an overall safer environment was created for those walking along their main street (McLennan, 2020).

As mentioned earlier, this is a controversial topic that has two very justifiable sides to the story. On one hand, less traffic congestion and quieter towns may outweigh the negatives for some people. On the other hand, small business owners have the potential to be negatively impacted when all the traffic that usually contains their customers is now diverted away from their business. One particular case that was looked at included the towns of Mount Vernon and Lisbon, Iowa. These small towns of under 5,000 people used to rely on the busy traffic that consisted of a number of people even higher than their population that drove through their town each day (“Bypasses Spur Concern”, 2015). One particular local real estate agent of the town commented, “It’s terrible business...If the general public is not stopping to your shop because they are going 70 mph, it’s going to take a lot of money out of this community” (“Bypasses Spur Concern”, 2015). Unfortunately, this result is not the only time it has been witnessed in a small town after it was bypassed. One study found that towns that recently underwent a highway bypass construction experienced difficulty adjusting their economies in an attempt to draw more people off the freeway and back into their town (“Potential Effects of”, 2018).

However, there is great potential for many positive impacts to come out of a newly constructed bypass. Highway bypasses are particularly advantageous to commercial vehicles and trucks as they eliminate congestion and improve regional travel time (Seggerman et al., 2010). Reducing traffic flow along main streets in small towns may be a desired result as that means an overall quieter town and safer streets that experience high levels of foot traffic (Handy et al.,

2000). Community goals regarding highway bypasses greatly depend on the particular town. What may be a solution for one small town could mean the end of another town.

Current literature on this topic studies just how big of an economic impact highway bypasses have on smaller businesses within these towns. Many state department of transportation programs have conducted extensive studies on small towns that were recently bypassed. Most of the results from these studies vary, meaning there is no firm answer when it comes to whether highway bypasses positively or negatively affect bypassed small businesses and towns as a whole. One study completed in Texas found that highway bypasses actually have the potential to lead to an increase in sales for businesses because bypasses allow for traffic to be brought to or by more communities overall (Handy et al., 2000). Another study also completed in Texas studied overall per capita sales of a town using four different indicators – retail, gas stations, eating and drinking establishments, and service industries (Srinivasan & Kockelman, 2002). The study found that of these four types of businesses commonly present in smaller towns, gas stations suffered the highest sales loss and found a direct correlation between traffic volumes and local sales (Srinivasan & Kockelman, 2002). One study completed in Oklahoma found that highway bypasses had no significant impact on an already declining small town business district (Rogers & Marshment, 2000). Finally, another study completed in Kentucky found that overall retail sales decreased after a bypass was constructed within the study area (Thompson et al., 2001). More studies have also been completed and continue to find results ranging from all sides of the spectrum. This proves that the overall impacts of highway bypasses are relatively circumstantial to each unique town.

Conclusion

As Daniel Herriges (2021) summed up well in his article “To Bypass or Not to Bypass”, highway bypasses are only as good as a community can make them. Keeping in mind overall community goals and intentions prior to the construction of a bypass plays an important role in the overall success of a bypass. Herriges (2021) states, “A bypass is not categorically good or bad for a town.” Highway bypasses can have many positive impacts on a community overall, if executed in the correct way. If done incorrectly, a new bypass can simply leave a community worse off than it was before. It is important to communicate about this topic because there are many pros and cons for both sides of opinions. Informed communities are only made possible through the proper communication by their opinion leaders.

Highway bypasses are important because the impacts of them are very circumstantial yet can be substantial. All stakeholders need to understand both the potential risk and reward before agreeing to undergo a new highway bypass construction project. In some cases, other solutions may provide a better answer for a town instead of a bypass. This is a controversial topic, and people on both sides often feel very adamant and opinionated about their beliefs. The science itself is relatively inconclusive regarding the larger impact that bypasses have on communities. Some studies found that bypasses actually helped bring more people to their town, some found no overall significant impact on their town, and others found that bypasses played a part in their town’s declining prosperity. Highway bypasses are always going to be a sector of community development, so the most important thing a community can do is educate themselves and conduct thorough assessments of their own town to better estimate what kind of impact a bypass could mean for them. Taking the public’s opinion into consideration is an important step that all department of transportations should do before constructing a new highway bypass.

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