



Home

-
-
-
-
-

- [Andy Alexander](#)
- [Art Dalglish](#)
- [Chuck Holmes](#)
- [Carl Rauscher](#)
- [Anne Usher](#)
- [Rick McKay \(photo\)](#)

REPORTERS

- [Rebecca Carr](#)
- [Bob Dart](#)
- [Bob Deans](#)
- [Marilyn Geewax](#)
- [Ken Herman](#)
- [David Ho](#)
- [Bob Keefe](#)
- [Bob Kemper](#)
- [Larry Lipman](#)
- [Julia Malone](#)
- [Eunice Moscoso](#)
- [Jeff Nesmith](#)

New Federally Funded Road Sensors Won't Feed Details to Georgia's 511

By **JULIA MALONE**

Cox News Service
Friday, August 17, 2007

WASHINGTON — In traffic-clogged Atlanta, new solar-powered sensors are set for installation next week along 80 miles of roads as part of a \$50 million federal program to help big cities guide rush-hour drivers and assist transportation planners.

But there's a hitch. The data gathered by these sensors won't be owned by Georgia but will be the property of the private contractor Traffic.com, which was "earmarked" for the project by supporters in Congress.

Under agreements, only recently made public, much of the valuable "real-time" traffic information is reserved for Traffic.com to use in its private traffic services.

As a result, Georgia's new 511 travel line won't be able to use all the data collected by the new road sensors, set up with \$2 million in federal funds. The most detailed information — used to calculate drive times — will be reserved for those who use the Traffic.com's private services, such as its Web site, or who drive an Acura TL or Cadillac equipped with traffic guidance systems supplied by the company.

Mark Demidovich, assistant state traffic engineer for the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT),

- [Scott Shepard](#)
- [Jessica Wehrman](#)

FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS

- [Margaret Coker](#)
- [Shelley Emling](#)
- [Jeremy Schwartz](#)
- [Craig W. Simons](#)
- [Mike Williams](#)

**SYSTEMS EDITING &
ADMINISTRATION**

- [Rafi Guroian](#)
- [Ray McGowan](#)

OTHER

- [Rachel Barnhardt](#)
 - [Susan Burns](#)
 - [Beverly McGowan](#)
-

acknowledged the restrictions this week after reviewing the terms of the state's agreement with Traffic.com.

"When we first signed this (agreement), we didn't even have 511 on our radar screen yet," he said. "This is something I'm going to need to discuss," he said, adding that he wants to feed all available information into the 511 service.

Although GDOT already has extensive coverage of roadways around Atlanta, Demidovich said he welcomed the federally financed Traffic.com project to fill in gaps along Georgia routes 120 and 400, Interstate 675, and the Stone Mountain Freeway.

"The deal for Georgia DOT was very attractive," Demidovich. "We could get all these sensors at no cost to us or the state."

However, Demidovich this week came face to face with the fine print of the agreement, which states that Georgia would have to bargain for the right to use the detailed data from the new sensors for electronic message signs that project drive times.

John Collins, vice president for intelligence transportation systems for Traffic.com, said this week that his company would consider striking a deal on the message signs.

As for the 511 service, he said Georgia could use only the so-called "Basic Traveler" information, which includes road closures, major delays and crashes and indicates the level of congestion by color coding routes as red, yellow or green.

"At the end of the day, we do need to be able to sell something to pay for the ongoing cost of the system," Collins said, adding that the company makes its revenue by providing the "granular" details such as the minute-by-minute speed of traffic flow to its various traffic information services, including the Website and radio spots, which carry ads.

The Georgia agreement, signed last year, is similar to those struck with other high-traffic localities, including Philadelphia; Tampa, Fla.; Boston; the states of California and Virginia; and Columbus, Ohio.

Some major cities, including Miami and Houston, have turned down the Traffic.com grants, and several cities have indicated they would wait for a future phase of the project, which was expected to be more flexible.

The federal project was championed in 1998 by Rep. Bud Shuster, a now retired Republican who was known as a master of bringing transportation projects to his home state of Pennsylvania. Traffic.com, then an upstart tech company based in Wayne, Pa., was awarded the first contract in a program that later expanded to a \$50 million effort nationwide. The firm was bought earlier this year by NAVTEQ, a Silicon Valley tech giant.

The precise arrangements have been secret until recently, when the Sunlight Foundation, a private watchdog group that seeks to open government documents to public viewing, obtained the Traffic.com agreements with various localities through a Freedom of Information Act request.

Critics charge that the Traffic.com contracts stem from its political connections in Washington, D.C., where the firm has hired more than 10 different lobbying firms, including one run by a former top aide to Shuster.

"It was all done by political guys that know how to game the system," said Jerry Werner, an engineer who until 2005 was a federal subcontractor working for the National Transportation Operations Coalition, where he followed the Traffic.com developments. He has continued to track the federal program.

"The program's goals are exactly right, but once you look into the agreements, you can see how they are very limiting," he said. Even so, he said the \$2 million grants offered each city were inviting.

"It's \$2 million of your taxpayer dollars," he said. "But from the perspective of the local agency, it's free." Even the requirement for local governments to provide matching money was waived in most cases, he said.

Georgia is providing no cash for the Atlanta project, Georgia DOT's Demidovich said.

Traffic.com's competitors are protesting that federal tax dollars are being used to build up a rival.

"I don't think public money should go to exclusively get data for one company," said Bryan Mistele, president and CEO of Inrix, Inc. The Kirkland, Wash., firm supplies travel data for Clear Channel radio stations and BMW automobiles.

"Public dollars went to pay for the sensors. Everyone should benefit," he said. Mistele said his company, which also manages the 511 travel-information line for Virginia, has been denied data from the Traffic.com sensors in that state.

Christopher Leonard, who oversees traffic information broadcasting in Atlanta and the Southeast for the radio giant Westwood One, said he was concerned that "the open lines of communications" with GDOT would be transformed into "a pipeline" to his competitor.

Responding to the critics, Traffic.com's Collins said, "Competitors are going to spin things one way or the other."

"It's a public/private partnership, and it's provided to Atlanta and to other cities around the country at no capital or operating cost to the local government," he said, adding that all of the detailed traffic data would be fed to the state and federal transportation agencies for use in long-term planning.

As to charges of political favoritism, Collins said, "We're a Pennsylvania company, so certainly we reach out to Pennsylvania legislators."

"Certainly companies can have lobbyists in Washington, D.C.," he said.

U.S. Department of Transportation spokeswoman Nancy Singer said the agency would not provide an official to discuss the Traffic.com program. She provided a terse e-mail statement noting that Congress

required that a single company be awarded the traffic sensor contracts.

Asked whether there are "benefits" to a program that gives exclusive data to the contractor, the DOT provided no specifics but confirmed the terms of the agreements with the statement: "Only the data gathered by the contractor are subject to exclusive use by the contractor."

© Cox Newspapers 2005