

Take Issue or Take Liberty (Part 1)

By Minnesota State Senator Julianne Ortman

Minnesotans should drive 15% fewer miles each year.

The Senate Transportation Committee passed goals for mandating a per capita reduction in annual vehicle miles traveled on a straight party line vote on February 24 (11-6). SF 549 will implement this mandate by 2013. Each city in the metro area will have to assess the vehicle miles traveled in the city by 2011 and the Minnesota Department of Transportation will implement the reduction plan by 2013.

Make no mistake, this bill is on the incrementalist fast track at the capitol: a quiet change in policy, with study funding in Year 1 (there was almost no debate in committee); study is presented to Policy Chairs with tracking data from the Cities in Year 2; MNDOT publishes its implementation plan in Year 3; a "bi-partisan" Commission reviews and publishes recommendations in Year 4; the State adopts recommendations in statute in Year 5. In the meantime, other states will have followed the same process, so by Year 5 we will face the additional argument that this is already law in other states.

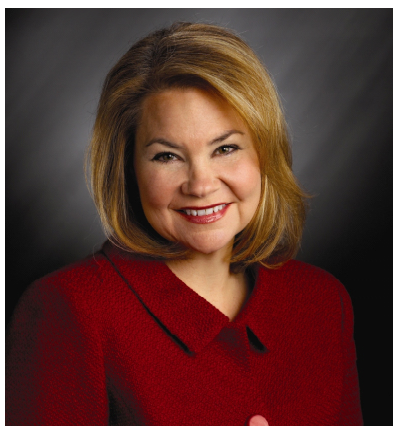
The cost to implement this plan will pose no barrier: the state can simply track odometer readings when we apply for license tabs. If over-the-limit, Minnesotans could face impoundment of their vehicles, steep fines or perhaps even criminal penalties. So what's the big deal? So far, the Senate Transportation Committee won't take

away your property, just your freedom to use it. I voted "no," because I take issue with that.

It doesn't take too much creativity to imagine what the "new" Minnesota will look like under the new plan. Those who commute a significant distance to work, drive for a living, or drive to vacation homes or resorts will feel the impact first. There will be geographical limits on what jobs we can apply for or where we can live in relation to the job market. But take this logic one or two steps further, because the incrementalists will never be satisfied with a 15% reduction. Internet sales will skyrocket as Minnesota shop-owners and their employees lose out on sales. Sales tax and individual income revenues will decline. The economies in greater Minnesota will suffer even further from declining populations; fewer cabin owners and tourists means lower property values and a dev-

astated real estate market. (The unemployment rates in Northern Minnesota are already approaching 10%!)

Fifteen to twenty percent fewer trucking miles means fewer product deliveries to and from our factories and stores, with inflationary prices and shortages soon to follow. Those that can afford to will buy on the internet, others will face quality issues and scarcity. We will sell fewer cars and fewer gallons of gas; roadside restaurants, inns and gas stations will go out of business and we will generate less motor vehicle, income and sales taxes, and less gasoline tax dollars. Our 50 mile per day quota will mean we watch the Twins and Vikings on T.V. instead of buying tickets; trips to the Mall of America, regional arts and theater venues and amusement parks will get cut out of our travel budgets even if we can afford them financially.



Senator Ortman has been a board member on the Southwest Corridor Transportation Coalition since 2001, and has served on the Senate Transportation Budget and Policy Committee for seven years.

Now balance the devastating economic impacts against the well-meaning premise and purpose of the policy: driving cars is bad, riding the bus or train is better because greenhouse gas emissions are bad for the environment. Senators prefer not to discuss more direct or reasonable alternatives like off-shore drilling or repealing the ban on nuclear energy. In Transportation Committee we were lectured that buying a gallon of gas is tantamount to support for terrorist regimes. How could anyone oppose that logic? Yet, I would argue that the proposed policy is tantamount to totalitarianism here at home: "centralized control by an autocratic authority; the political concept that the citizen should be subject to an absolute state

authority." This is why I wondered aloud: "Are we in America?"

If the government can limit the miles we travel, the government can also limit the number of cows on a farm (to regulate methane), impose a tax on our cylinder indics (to discourage disfavored purchases), control our thermostats or the square footage permitted in our homes (to regulate energy consumption), and even limit the number of children we have (those little carbon-emitters).

The great Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis reminded us to be ever-vigilant against these well-meaning, incremental threats to our liberty, when he argued in 1928 against government's right

to obtain evidence through unfettered wire-tapping, even in aid of law enforcement: "Experience should teach us to be most on our guard to protect liberty when the Government's purposes are beneficent...The greatest dangers to liberty lurk in insidious encroachment by men of zeal, well meaning but without understanding."

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