

Spotlight

TAKING IT TO THE STREETS

CHICAGO—Anyone who's heard Mayor Richard M. Daley speak knows his words don't always flow, um, real smoothly. He talks in fits and starts and detours here and there before eventually arriving at his point. It's much like driving in his city, where, studies show, motorists waste nearly 60 hours a year idled at the 2,818 intersections that split the city of the big shoulders into, well, a crammed grid of jam-packed streets, avenues, and boulevards. But Daley promises

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A driver's view of traffic on a snowy day in Chicago

change, borrowing from forward-thinking cities (at least in terms of traffic design) like Los Angeles, Houston, and Tokyo to create a smoother ride for Chicago's 2.9 million residents. "The time people waste," Daley fumes, "it's too much!" So, in April, Hizzoner will roll out a new Traffic Management Authority, with \$14 million in new federal dough. The department will be housed at the city's Office of Emergency Management and Communications, where a vast computer network will track traffic flow. Accidents and disabled cars will be flagged, and tow trucks will rush to haul them away. Smart signals—flashing stop and go and keeping an electronic eye on the traffic—will be installed. All lights will be synchronized, sensors will be placed in the roads, and aides on bikes will help unclog traffic.

Ron Huberman of the emergency management center says the new signals could shave up to eight minutes off rides and speed travel by 25 percent. The overhaul—which experts say cities like New York should consider—won't be cheap: Some 1,000 smart signals at up to \$250,000 per intersection will be installed. But motorists say it's worth it. "There's no time it's not bad unless you're working the third shift," moans Sean McEaney. So when might traffic ease? "I'm not going to make some pronouncement," says Daley, "that traffic will flow right now, when someone's sitting in his car thinking: 'Hey Mayor, what about this?'" But if L.A. and Houston are any guide, Windy City residents can expect a whole lot less congestion in, oh, a few years or so. —Eric Ferkenhoff