

Super Bowl traffic needs a game plan

Getting to the game can be a nightmare, as 2001 demonstrated.

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PHOENIX - Super Bowl transportation planners in Arizona for this year's game still shudder at their 2001 experience in Tampa, when football fans joined with Gasparilla revelers to turn South Tampa streets into parking lots.

They were thrilled to learn the NFL required the two events be on separate weekends when it granted Tampa the 2009 Super Bowl.

"It was a recipe for a little bit of a disaster," said Tony Vitrano, president and chief executive of Orlando's Gameday Management Group, which the NFL hires to oversee Super Bowl transportation.

That doesn't mean all their problems are solved. Transportation planning in the days before and on Super Bowl Sunday is a complicated task that recently has become highly technical.

"It's gone from what I would call manual management to electronic management," said Greg Cox, director of operations for Tampa's Super Bowl host committee.

Cox traveled to Arizona this week to see how transportation planners handle increased traffic and coordination of more than 2,000 buses, mini buses, limousines and chauffeured cars used to cart thousands of reporters from their hotels to the media center downtown, football teams to the stadium and VIPs to special events.

Ability to shift routes

Global Positioning Systems, electronic connection with state transportation officials and individualized directions for stadium workers and game ticket holders that take them from their point of origin directly to their parking spots - a technology Gameday calls Click and Park - helps keep traffic running smoothly.

Directions are determined by working with city traffic engineers and based on how many cars specific roads can handle.

"If any one roadway has reached its limit from an engineering perspective, that roadway is no longer given as a route. It allows us to distribute the traffic evenly around the stadium," said Vitrano, whose company has run transportation for eight Super Bowls and five Olympics. "It's an opportunity to touch every person with as

much updated information as possible as opposed to, well, the Super Bowl's here, here's a map in the paper, here's a map in the fan guide, watch the news and hopefully everyone will have heard what they should and shouldn't do."

Last-minute changes are simple to accommodate.

In Arizona, for example, rains early this week rendered useless an old cotton field designated as a makeshift parking lot. Much of the regular stadium parking is occupied by a 1.3-million-square-foot football-themed amusement center and official tailgate party. An e-mail blast to those set to park in the field let them know the new parking location and directions to get there.

Planning also involves reversing lane directions to get people in and out of the stadium as quickly as possible.

A helicopter buzzing overhead will monitor traffic jams so bus drivers and VIP chauffeurs can receive driving directions to avoid them.

Harbour Island access

Santiago Corrada, the city of Tampa's neighborhood services administrator who met with his counterparts in Phoenix and Glendale on Friday, said one challenge will be handling downtown traffic the week before the Super Bowl around the Tampa Convention Center, which will serve as headquarters for Super Bowl media.

In Phoenix, streets around the center and NFL hotels are blocked off to provide access to buses and an ESPN radio stage, as well as facilitate security. That might be difficult in Tampa where access to residences on Harbour Island pass right by the Convention Center.

"We have a different set of circumstances," Corrada said. "We have to worry about the folks who will be living there when the show's over."

So what will all this mean next year to those who live around Raymond James Stadium or simply want to trek from one part of Tampa to another amid Super Bowl activities?

"People have to be smart enough to know the typical day in the life is going to be different," Vitrano said. "I wouldn't say, 'Folks, stay home, don't come down here.' I would say be educated before you do."

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