The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

'Smart' Solutions to Reduce Congestion

By Lena Smirnova

June 05, 2013



Cell phones and other technology will be used to reduce traffic congestion and improve the environment.

Cell phone warnings about traffic jams, a network management center to monitor all of Moscow's transportation activities in real time and metro passes that work on commuter trains are just a few services that city authorities are preparing in their efforts to ease congestion.

Moscow's transportation officials presented an ambitious roadmap of how public transport will function in the city at the Smart City of the Future forum this week. The plans rely heavily on the use of mobile communications platforms and synchronizing existing services.

"What does 'smart city' mean to us? It's a city where information is accessible and where information helps people, authorities, pedestrians, drivers, public transport users and bikers," said Evgeny Mikhailov, first deputy head of Moscow's Transportation Department. "The most important thing ... is for people to get enthusiastic about using this information."

As one of the projects, a central monitoring hub for managing transportation-related

information will be created by May 2014.

The hub will collect information about the status of the metro, commuter trains, land transport and points where they intersect. This information would then be made available to municipal authorities as well as city residents through a smartphone platform that is expected to be ready for use later this year.

Residents would be alerted to difficult transport situations via SMS, a system that Mikhailov said could be in place in two years. In addition to finding out early about major road incidents, commuters would be able to track how long it will take for their bus to arrive and estimated travel time to their destination.

Officials would compile information through several tracking mechanisms, including monitoring the location of cellphones to identify where commuters are congregating. Mikhailov assured, however, that these measures would be anonymous and would not infringe on privacy.

The roads in Moscow are now overloaded by 42 percent, Mikhailov said. The city estimates that the number of cars traveling during peak hours has to be cut by at least a third while the amount of public transport should increase by 150 percent to normalize the situation.

One of the ways the authorities plan to increase public transportation efficiency is to expand the functionality of the unified ticket system introduced in February, by which tickets valid on both the metro and surface transportation began to be sold, to include the commuter train system. This service could be available as early as December.

But Maksim Shingarkin, deputy chairman of the State Duma's committee on natural resources, criticized the Moscow government for giving too much attention to technological innovations and not enough to common sense solutions.

Land transport moves inefficiently while some of its routes have remained the same since Stalinist times, he said. Empty public buses roll along in the same lanes as cars, block traffic when they make their regular stops and thus contribute to greater emissions.

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Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/06/05/smart-solutions-to-reduce-congestion-a24701