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We manage traffic Rube Goldberg-style

Rube Goldberg was an engineer by training who rose to prominence not for his engineering skills but for his political cartoons, for which he won the Pulitzer Prize in 1948. Goldberg was also famous for his cartoons that depicted whimsical machines with complex mechanisms to perform simple tasks.



**BRIAN
WILLIAMS**

Commentary

Goldberg's fantastic contraptions served as an inspiration for the annual Rube Goldberg competitions held at colleges, universities and high schools across the country. In years past, students have been required to develop machines that select, clean and peel an apple; make a cup of coffee; toast a piece of bread; put a stamp on an envelope; and drop a penny into a piggy bank.

This year, Purdue University hosted the 20th national contest, in which the task was to assemble a hamburger consisting of no less than one pre-cooked meat patty, two vegetables and two condiments, sandwiched between two bun halves. Teams were judged by the complexity and creativity they used to design the machines and perform the task. The winning machine had to com-

plete two successful runs with a minimum of 20 steps. The winner, a Purdue team that has won three of the last four competitions, completed the task in 156 steps.

I explain all this because I sometimes wonder if many of the winners of the national competition work for the Indianapolis-Marion County Department of Public Works Traffic Signal Division. It seems that the mission of the division is to ensure that no two traffic signals within the entire city are synchronized. If you were to multiply the number of stoplights in Indianapolis owned by the city (approximately 1,160) by the number of cars, considering an average commute time of 26 minutes, you would arrive at the number of permutations upon which these valiant men and women labor to get us to work, home and the grocery store.

Unfortunately, the Indianapolis-Marion County Planning Organization has undertaken an effort to dismantle the fruits of the DPW's labors by undertaking an \$80,000 study to evaluate city-wide traffic signal coordination. This study should be canceled! The city's demand for talented engineers from Purdue, Rose Hulman and elsewhere to maintain our historic Rube Goldbergian traffic-signal system is one of the most potent weapons against the "brain drain."

Further, synchronized traffic signals would reduce our travel time, not to mention the fuel wasted in traffic jams. Coordinated stoplights might decrease air pollution resulting from vehicle acceleration and deceleration. Studies have also shown that noise pollution may be reduced. If synchronized signals are implemented, the nine-county region's historical non-attainment for fine particulate matter and ground level ozone pollution by the Environmental Protection Agency could be in jeopardy. Indiana's leadership in carbon dioxide emissions may be in danger.

A booming economy and a migration of people from undesirable locales such as Illinois or parts farther west may ensue. A reasonable traffic system would bring more conventions, more sporting events and more people who would marvel at Indianapolis' traffic management.

However, if city leaders believe synchronized traffic signals are necessary to secure the future of Indianapolis, I suspect free pizza and hamburgers and beer would entice the winners (of legal age) of this year's Rube Goldberg contest to solve the problem by next semester, saving taxpayers nearly \$80,000. •

Williams is regional venture partner of Hopewell Ventures, a Midwest-focused private-equity firm. His column appears monthly. He can be reached at bwilliams@ibj.com.