

The McTeer Bridge has closed, and now a lot mouths are wide open -- with astonishment, outrage, and in some cases, a certain giddiness.



Some people have act like they're amazed to find themselves waking up one morning living on an island. They have kept themselves in careful denial about the possibility that a bridge could go out at any time.

And now it's happened.

Some are angry. How could the government let this happen? Why don't we have a third crossing in place already? Why did we let people build so many houses on so many islands? All good questions.

As for the people who are giddy and gleeful, they are keeping their mouths shut. They don't want to be punched by the other folks.

in the back of their minds they're thinking, "Hey, chill, this is just a taste of what we'll have in 2025." In short, the closing of the bridge has pointed a harsh spotlight on the problems of suburban sprawl.

I haven't seen the movie Next yet, and I've heard it's really bad, but the point I'm trying to make is that the guy has premonitions about what's about to happen, and it ain't pretty. Now, due to the numbskulledness of a (former?) crane operator on a barge in the Beaufort River, we're having a similar experience as a community. We see the future, and it is congested.

Unless we do something to control sprawl, this kind of bumper-to-bumper traffic is going to be the legacy we leave our children.

And I haven't even talked about the money yet. Luckily for taxpayers, someone else is going to pay for this particular mistake. The company that insured the barge is going to take a hit to its bottom line, and I feel bad for them, and the clients they are going to pass the costs along to.

But the price of fixing this bridge is going to be miniscule compared to what we'll have to pay to maintain an automobile-focused transportation system in 2025, when taxpayers will be footing the bill from now until eternity.

This is not to make light of the current situation, though. Without that bridge, it will be tough for the next few months. It's going to take longer to commute to jobs. Parents who send their kids to out-of-zone schools will have to fight congestion, then make their way back to their homes or places of employment.

Going to town will require considerable forethought, and a lot of people won't even want to leave the house. Shopping at Wal-Mart will become a major life event.

For a lot of people, the bridge closure threatens to ruin the delicate balance between work and family. There already weren't enough hours in the day to get enough sleep, or to eat dinner together, or take a walk with the kids.

Parents were already under serious time pressure before the bridge closed. Now the stress of juggling so many responsibilities -- and living so far away from work or school -- just intensified.

Then there is all the other potential weirdness, like the high probability that at least some of those big tomato trucks are going to come barreling off the island, then go rumbling down Carteret Street, then veer out of control and tip over on Bellamy Curve, leaving a mountain of tomatoes blocking the road. Just like the good old days.

Yes, the good old days, like when the Woods Bridge would break down, and everyone

would have to use their boats. Or their friends' boats.

You see, it could be worse. You could be paddling a kayak in whitecaps, steering your outboard motor in freezing wind, or sailing on the open water during a lightening storm.

It makes the prospect of sitting behind the wheel of a car on Sea Island Parkway, creeping along at 5 mph while listening to a Lynard Skynard CD, seem almost bearable.

When it comes down to it, our bridges offer an illusion of convenience. The reality is that we are always vulnerable to bridge failure, whether the cause is natural disaster or human error or mechanical malfunction.

Just as each individual household has a plan for hurricanes or fires or whatever, it would be good to have a personal plan for bridgelessness.

What kind of boat can you buy or borrow? What friends and family have docks or landings you can use? Who do you know in town, or on the islands, that will lend you a car?

If you own a business, how will your restaurant or grocery store or gas station ship in its supplies?

Because as long as we have bridges, we will have bridges at risk of getting damaged. And when a major hurricane comes along, it's possible we will have no bridges at all.