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Nokia turns people into traffic sensors

Posted by [Erica Ogg](#) | [13 comments](#)

UNION CITY, Calif.--On a cool, overcast morning in the parking lot of a Lowe's hardware store, 100 UC Berkeley students lined up in rows ready to jump into a bevy of idling vehicles.

With media and VIPs from companies like Nokia, Navteq, General Motors, BMW, and CalTrans looking on, wave after wave of students left the parking lot to drive a 10-mile stretch of the nearby 880 freeway as part of a large-scale experiment to test how cell phones can monitor and predict traffic.

The test, conducted all day Friday, was put on by the California Center for Innovative Transportation (CCIT) as a joint project between Nokia, CalTrans, and Berkeley's Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering.

Each student car was issued a Nokia N95 phone with GPS and special traffic-monitoring software developed by Nokia's Palo Alto, Calif.-based research lab--plus a Bluetooth headset. As the students drove the freeway, the phone sent data about each car's speed and position back to the company's research facility. The data is compiled and used to predict traffic patterns and help drivers get where they need to be quickly. Nokia hopes that one day the system could be a significantly cheaper way to track traffic than the permanent sensors installed in roadways or next to them because it uses equipment most people already own: cell phones.



Video: Using cell phones to track traffic

Alex Bayen, a professor of civil and environmental engineering and lead researcher on the project for Berkeley, called the experiment "a glimpse into the future of traffic information collecting and data processing."

An obvious concern is privacy, and one that Bayen was quick to address. The information sent from each phone is designed to keep each "moving traffic sensor" anonymous. When the information is sent to Nokia, Bayen says all of the personal identifying information is stripped from the data, and encryption methods on the level of what banks use is employed to keep information private. Also, the traffic monitoring software only broadcasts information when it senses the phone has entered a specific area, like a highway. It does not track the phones that are on cul-de-sacs, for example.

The data from the phones will be sent back to the Nokia Research Center where a team will analyze the usability of the data and determine what comes next.

Nokia Chief Technology Officer Bob Iannucci, who was on hand for the field test, said this particular project is moving at a more aggressive pace than most of Nokia's research because of the potential impact of the experiment. The phone maker hopes to expand the experiment from 100 to possibly 1,000 people soon. And instead of participating in a one-day test, users would be invited to use the traffic monitoring software in the course of their daily routines.

To see CNET News.com's video of the experiment, [click here](#).

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