Go with the flow

Scientists tackle the mystery of ... the traffic jam.

So you're bumper-to-bumper as you creep through the Rainbow curve on your way to the daily grind. Or perhaps you're two greens deep and have yet to make it through the zoo at Sahara and Decatur.

Relax. Perhaps you'll find comfort in the knowledge that some of the nation's brainiest brains are hard at work to unravel one of the great mysteries of the 20th century: What causes traffic jams and what can be done about them?

That's right, the Los Alamos National Laboratory, the birthplace of the atomic bomb, is preparing to tackle congestion.

Now, you may be saying that it shouldn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that lots of cars and not enough lanes cause traffic problems, but it's not so simple. By applying tenets of natural law and physics to the flow of cars on the highway, scientists believe they can better predict and even ameliorate congestion.

Alan Sipress of The Washington Post writes that, "Despite some tantalizing progress, reaching a full understanding of traffic jams has been slow going. Scientists said they are closer to comprehending the birth of the universe than the daily tie-ups along an interstate."

As Hani S. Mahmassani, a University of Texas professor, told The Post: "All of a sudden to go from free flow to stop-and-go, this remains one of the mysteries of our time."

Ultimately, scientists hope to reach conclusions that could lead to practical solutions for smoothing traffic patterns. In addition, their work could be used to better calculate the precise benefits of widening highways or to figure the impacts of proposed developments.

"Traffic is particles with motive," one scientist told Mr. Sipress. "I think it's cool as hell."

With that kind of enthusiasm tackling the problem, we can all rest easier. Even as you're boxed in on the right while the guy in front of you rides his brakes down Interstate 15.

Beep, beep.