

TRANSPORTATION CHOICES

by Supervisor Linda Parks, March 2008

Traffic is a major problem for cities in California. It is a problem for business because time is money. Trucks and employees caught in traffic mean delays in deliveries and service. Traffic is a problem for our schools as any parent who tries to drop off a kid knows, or any college or high school student trying to find parking knows. It's a problem for families when a working parent ends up spending more time in traffic than with their children. Traffic also impedes first responders from getting to the scene of an emergency, jeopardizing peoples lives. With 7 million car accidents a year injuring millions of people and killing over 100 people a day, the impact is felt by many.

From a health perspective, car emissions account for almost half of the air pollution we breathe. We measure vehicle emissions from new development in tons of pollutants a year--what if we measured it in number of children with asthma? Currently one in seven children in California has asthma. Studies have also found that diesel exhaust causes small particulates to lodge in lungs and accounts for increased cancer rates for people who live near freeways. The type of transportation we choose takes its toll personally, as well as institutionally as it impacts our emergency rooms, hospitals and health system.

The annual financial cost of car crashes in the United States is more than \$230 billion. The implications our transportation choices have on our national economy are staggering when you factor in the hundreds of billions of tax dollars it takes to repair, maintain and widen U.S. highways and roads. In California alone, Caltrans is seeing their highway system deteriorate and would need an additional billion dollars to keep it up. In the six-county SCAG (Southern California Association of Governments) region, the latest Regional Transportation Plan calls for \$200 billion dollars in transportation projects that, once completed, would still leave commuters with a 25% increase in the time they spend in traffic. Add this to the car industry becoming dominated by foreign companies with Detroit automakers for the first time having less than 50% of the U.S. auto market. We have foreign companies building our autos and foreign oil keeping them moving to the tune of what some expect to soon be \$4 a gallon. Transportation costs, including the costs to truck, fly and ship goods are driving inflation higher.

The environmental consequences are also far-reaching, from noise pollution, to air pollution, to polluted stormwater runoff from roads into our creeks and waterways, and the impact of roads on wildlife. Vehicle emissions also constitute 27% of all greenhouse gas emissions.

From our health, to our environment, to our economy, so much hinges on what seems like a simple choice of what transportation mode we choose.

Our car economy also plays a major role in land use. The thousands of miles of highways in Southern California have made us famous for urban sprawl. Fortunately, Ventura County has taken a different approach in land use planning by making a concerted effort in the County's General Plan to keep development in the cities and not

have the cities sprawl into each other. This is reinforced by SOAR which protects the agricultural and open space lands that separate the cities by vote of the people. Yet development in the cities continues to fill the few east west freeways we have in the County, namely the 118, 126, and the 101 freeways. Unless something extraordinary happens, traffic is not going to get better, and there are only so many cars you can add to our existing roads. What choices do we have?

Moorpark Councilman Keith Millhouse suggested the Ventura County Transportation Commission look at making the 118 and 126 toll roads. I couldn't support even studying the issue. Paying a toll for an existing public road that was built and is maintained with our tax dollars doesn't add choices, and would transfer the traffic to other roads.

People need better choices. Traffic congestion and increasing gas prices are bringing more people to their tipping point. When gas becomes so expensive that people will give up their cars they will need choices. Talk to any senior citizen without a car and they'll tell you how few options are available.

Agencies that provide transit need to be proactive and realize, contrary to popular thought, that people will ride trains and buses. Particularly if there are trains and buses for them to take! A successful example is the Coastal Express VISTA bus line between Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties that has seen annual passenger counts go from 48,000 passengers in 2001 when it was started, to what is expected to be 200,000 passengers this year. Metrolink is also very popular as the full parking lots at each of the stations attests.

There is movement in some parts of California for more transportation options to reduce congestion. Currently there is discussion of a possible bond on the November ballot to bring high speed rail between northern and southern California, and last month the Los Angeles City Council voted unanimously to work on a plan to connect LAX, Burbank Airport, San Bernardino, Riverside and the San Pedro Ports with rail. The private sector company, American MagLev considers the project to be profitable because the MagLev trains could carry containers from the ports to areas inland. MagLev (Magnetic Levitation) uses electromagnetic forces to propel trains that can go up to 300 mph, are quiet, have low emissions, and can go up steep grades. Connecting with the ports could free up freeways from truck traffic and reduce diesel emissions. American MagLev believes they can build and operate the system with the revenue they would receive in container traffic. Neither the proposed high speed rail line to Northern California, nor the MagLev plan to connect the region's airports and ports includes Ventura County.

I think the solution to traffic is getting a handle on over-development that clogs our roads, and providing safe, convenient options for commuters and goods movement. The journey of a thousand miles begins with a first step and that step is needed to help meet the demand for more options and less traffic in the future.