

A clear road map for 405 emergencies

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A wide-open freeway will be emergency responders' friend during 405 shutdown, unlike this scene in 2010.
Photo: Mike Meadows/Flickr

Paramedics on motorcycles. A world-class art facility repurposed as a firefighting staging area. And a 10-mile expanse of the 405 Freeway stretching out, car-free, as an enormous potential helicopter landing pad.

Talk about turning the problem into the solution.

Sure, the 405 Freeway will be closed to all of *us* for [53 straight hours in mid-July](#). But for an army of law enforcement and public safety professionals, the freeway has emerged as a key element in a wide-ranging emergency response plan being put into place to cope with whatever may arise during the closure.

Not only will the 405 provide a possible helicopter landing strip, it also stands as a quick response conduit for police and firefighters, and even, in the event of a fire or natural disaster, a mass evacuation route.

“The freeway’s available to us if we need it at any time,” said LAPD spokesman Lt. Andy Neiman. Most of the 405 closure zone—stretching north from the 10 to the 101, and south from the 101 to Getty Center Drive—will be readily accessible to emergency responders during the freeway shutdown. The section immediately under the Mulholland Bridge—where the south side is being demolished, prompting the freeway closure in the first place—could even be made available if needed, although it would likely take several hours of clean-up to reopen a lane under the bridge once demo work had started in earnest, Neiman said.

Community concerns about gridlock on local streets—and about emergency vehicles being able to respond to calls promptly—have been running high as the 53-hour closure approaches. But public safety planners say they’re

confident they'll be able to get through.

"If anything happens in those areas, I would almost expect that people will have a quicker response than normal," said Los Angeles Fire Department Captain Alicia Mathis. "We want the community to be completely comfortable with our ability to respond."

Beyond the freeway itself, the Getty Center has offered to make itself available as a staging area for firefighting resources during the closure. Mathis said the facility was built with firefighting capabilities in mind, including an augmented water supply, roadways constructed to accommodate heavy fire trucks, a helicopter landing area and a design that would allow it to be temporarily converted to a command post in the event of a major brushfire or other disaster. "In addition to being an art asset and a beautiful facility, it's actually very functional," she said.

In addition to the Getty and the freeway, the department has identified a number of other "helispots" where choppers will be able to land and take off if necessary during the closure. Brush patrol rigs will be continuously moving through the area—including one each for Encino, the Getty Center and the Bel Air Crest and Mountaingate neighborhoods—and an infusion of extra firefighters and other equipment is planned along with full staffing at the existing fire stations in the area, she said.

The fire department also will be fielding teams of paramedics on motorcycles.

While the fire department has deployed paramedic bicycle teams at LAX and during large festivals, "the motorcycle team is really something new to make sure we have quick access" during the freeway closure, Mathis said. The two-wheel paramedics won't be able to transport patients, but will have a full array of equipment, such as defibrillators, for initial treatment of a medical emergency.

Likewise, LAPD motor officers will be on the frontlines during the freeway shutdown. "For any hot shot or important call, they will be the first responders," Lt. Neiman said.

To make sure that emergency responders are in position, the closure area is being subdivided into four "branches" located on either side of the 405 and above and below the Mulholland Bridge, Neiman said.

The public safety and traffic response to the closure is being planned and managed by a "unified command" consisting of the LAPD, the Los Angeles Fire Department, the CHP and the Los Angeles Department of Transportation. A centralized command post will be up and running at the city's Emergency Operations Center during the weekend.

LAPD Cmdr. James Cansler said all the agencies would have high staffing levels during the shutdown, including a "heavy deployment of traffic officers and engineers" to adjust street signals and open up intersections depending on the flow of traffic. Cansler added that police and fire helicopters would be keeping tabs on the situation from above.

Metro spokesman Marc Littman said it was "premature to speculate" about what the cost of the public safety and traffic deployment would be during the 405 shutdown. "No doubt the tab will be hefty but ensuring public safety is paramount, and we're not going to skimp on safety," he said in an e-mail.

The [freeway closure](#) is necessary to protect the public during demolition because the Mulholland Bridge is so steep, Metro officials say. Some ramp and lane closures will begin the evening of Friday, July 15. The entire freeway will be closed all of Saturday, July 16, and Sunday, July 17, and is set to reopen at 5 a.m. on Monday, July 18. (The entire exercise will be repeated some 11 months later, when the north side of the bridge is demolished.)

The [\\$1.034 billion project](#) will add a 10-mile northbound carpool lane to the 405 Freeway and modernize three bridges over it, in addition to widening underpasses and creating improvements such as new "flyover" ramps at Wilshire Boulevard.

A [community meeting](#) is scheduled for Thursday, June 23, at the Skirball Center for those interested in learning more about plans for the closure. In addition, an [online chat](#) will be held on Wednesday, June 29.

Even with all of the advance planning, though, the best plan will be to steer clear of the area altogether. CHP Lt. Mark Garrett said there was just one word for what the average motorist would be experiencing that weekend: "Frustration. That's all you can say."



Getty Center will be a staging area for firefighting resources.

Photo: D P Lynch/Flickr

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