

# The 405's teachable moment

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Nearly one-third of Mirman School students now ride the bus, along with pupils from nearby Berkeley Hall.

It's that time of year again, when parents and kids run around making sure they've got all those back-to-school essentials: backpack, glue sticks, highlighter pens, detour map...

In the [405 Project](#) zone, the start of the school year comes with an extra dose of uncertainty as extended ramp closures, lane reductions and other traffic headaches can make tardy slips seem as inevitable as pop quizzes.

This year, as the long-running project heads into the homestretch, two major, months-long ramp closures are adding to the already challenging traffic patterns that accompany the first weeks of school.

At 10 p.m. tonight (Thursday, August 22), the eastbound Wilshire on-ramp to the northbound 405 Freeway will be closing for 90 days. The work is needed to complete the ambitious flyover ramps portion of the project, which is expected to make it safer and easier to enter and exit the freeway at Wilshire Boulevard. When finished, the new, longer on-ramp will be able to accommodate nearly three times as many vehicles.

At the same time, the Sunset Boulevard off-ramp of the northbound 405 is also closed until November in order to create a longer, wider ramp that can hold 60% more vehicles. (Detour information for both closures is [here](#).)

Meanwhile, the Mulholland Bridge over the 405, under construction after being dismantled in two Carmageddons, is still down to one open lane in each direction, slowing the commute to and from numerous private schools located on Mulholland Drive.

It all adds up to a rolling real-life lesson in planning, coping and improvising. And, as strange as it may seem, some of the solutions to emerge are now so popular that they're likely to outlast the project.

Like the shared busing program developed to transport Mirman School and Berkeley Hall students through the Mulholland maelstrom that the construction unleashed.

"We never had a bus. It never seemed like it was warranted," said Jocelyn Balaban, the Mirman administrator who developed the program. "The 405 construction pushed it."

Now, more than 100 children, nearly one-third of the student body, are riding the school's small fleet of buses, she said.

"The kids love the bus," she said, and so do parents happy to dispense with the stress of fighting traffic every morning. "One father said to me, 'I'm a better parent because of this.'"

Robert Woolley, a former Mirman administrator who served as the institutional coordinator for the Mulholland Educational Corridor Association when the 405 Project first rolled out, said the construction required radical readjustments to family routines.

"When Carmageddon first happened, gosh, the first couple of weeks it took people an hour or an hour and a half to get to school because of reduced capacity on the bridge," said Woolley, now the director of development for USC's Dornsife College. "A lot of parents waited till the last minute to drop off their kids. People learned, but there were a couple of weeks when it was really rough."

It didn't help that Carmageddon—the weekend-long freeway closure to pull down half of the Mulholland Bridge—had finished early and without the dire traffic impact many had predicted. Some parents, he said, "got lulled into a false sense of security and then the first day of school hit—BAM!"

After that, carpooling and busing really took off.

Those tactics also have proven popular at the Brentwood School off Sunset Boulevard, where they're approaching the first day of school Tuesday with cautious optimism about traffic—despite the ramp closures.

"I think we've navigated the major closures to date pretty well," said Shirley Blake, the schools' director of communications.

The school's other coping strategies include scheduling parent meetings and school events at non-peak traffic times and having faculty and staff arrive for work before 7:30 a.m. Students who drive themselves to school are required to travel in carpools and also arrive before 7:30 a.m. That policy predates the project but "it has certainly helped and I think it's increased," Blake said.

"We are just rolling with the punches," she added.

Cori Solomon, president of the Brentwood Glen Association, is also used to rolling with the punches but she's nervous about what the beginning of this school year will bring to her neighborhood. "Even though it's old hat, I definitely have apprehension" about the simultaneous ramp closures, Solomon said. The Sunset ramp closure, which started August 3, "hasn't been too bad—but school has been out."

UCLA, which is "really the 800-pound gorilla," starts Sept. 23.

By this time next year, the project—with its ramp and bridge improvements and new, 10-mile northbound carpool lane—is expected to be finished. With three back-to-school seasons under their belts, project officials are approaching the fourth with an array of mitigation measures.

A new, three-lane northbound on-ramp to the freeway from Santa Monica Boulevard reopened this week, just in time to serve as an alternative for motorists stymied by the Wilshire on-ramp closure.

Officials also are doubling the number of traffic control officers—from 12 to 24—at intersections in the area.

“Those will remain in place all next week as schools go back,” said Kasey Shuda, construction relations manager for the project. She said that officers will continue to be stationed at “prime locations” even after the back-to-school rush subsides.



The current northbound on-ramp from eastbound Wilshire, shown at center, will be demolished. Photo/Metro

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