

L.A. traffic's teachable moments

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[Home](#) > [News Sections](#) > L.A. traffic's teachable moments

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Barbour, right, confers with a colleague during Jamzilla. Photo/Los Angeles Times

If they gave college credit for navigating the massive construction project on the 405 Freeway, Los Angeles would be well into its post-graduate studies. And Mike Barbour would be our road-wearied faculty advisor.

As for big tests, well, the latest one came last weekend in the form of the 80-hour potential tie-up known as [Jamzilla](#)—and Barbour thinks we aced it.

“The public listens, I think that’s obvious,” said [Barbour](#), whose actual job is managing the [freeway improvements project](#) for Metro. “If it would have been less than 60% traffic diversion, we would have had problems probably for the entire weekend.”

In other words, we stayed away from the construction zone in droves over the long President’s Day weekend—an outcome that wasn’t at all certain going in.

Dozens of work crews working on the northbound 405 put down thousands of tons of paving material—enough to pave a 9-mile sidewalk from Santa Monica to LAX. But only on the holiday Monday did traffic show any signs of significant back-ups, and those were relatively short-lived and topped off at delays of about 45 minutes, Barbour estimated.

Shortly after Jamzilla was announced, Barbour acknowledged that he had his doubts about whether the driving

public had become too jaded to heed the stay-away messages this time, given how smoothly everything had gone during two previous epic closures, [Carmageddon](#) and [Carmageddon II](#).

Now, as he reflects on all three highly-publicized closures, he believes that the earlier experiences actually helped individual motorists realize how much their behavior could affect the outcome overall.

“I think they got it. They saw the benefit in the past of staying away, and this kind of carried through to this one. I don’t think we were crying wolf,” Barbour said. “People are not going, ‘Aw crap, they’re just making this stuff up.’ They’re thinking, ‘Yeah, it’s real. We’ll respond appropriately.’”

In fact, he believes there could be long-lasting lessons in traffic management and mass communication to grow out of the 405 Project experiences.

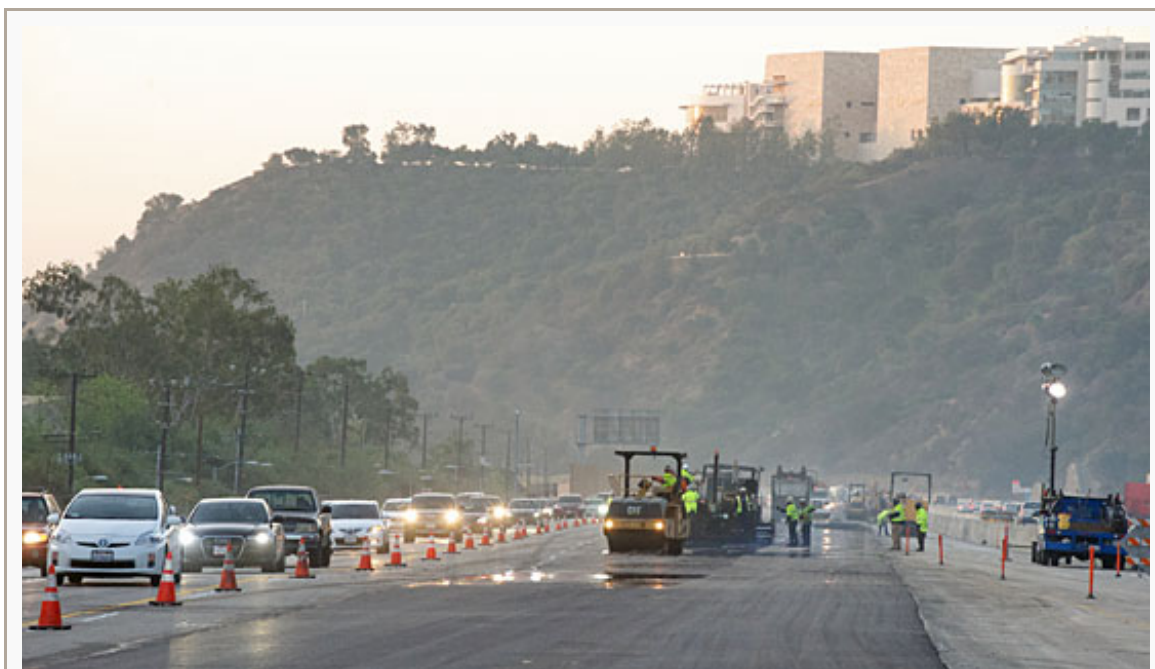
“This is actually kind of an amazing thing as far as dealing with traffic in L.A. Can we interact with the public on a regular basis to address these closures or impacts? Can we get them to start adjusting their habits and patterns? As things develop, can we get them to be responsive? Carmageddon and Jamzilla showed we can,” Barbour said. “And I think that’s a great thing. You could imagine what you could do with that if you could be more interactive on a regular basis with the public. Getting them to change their driving patterns and habits, that would be awesome.”

Now, with the “big milestone” of Jamzilla past and just one more potential 55-hour closure of the southbound 405 still in the works, Barbour is seeing the light at the end of the mega-project.

“Substantial completion,” meaning that people can drive the freeway and all of its improvements, including a new 10-mile northbound carpool lane, is set for this summer.

“Hopefully we’ll get it done the early part of the summer. All I can tell you is that there’s a real push. We are all just focused. Everybody’s pulling in the right direction,” Barbour said. “The sooner we get done, our lives get so much easier, and I think more importantly, the community is sick of this job. They’re sick of the impacts. That’s why we’re trying to do everything we can to minimize those right now.

“It’s been 5 years for me,” he added. “I’ve lived through thick and thin on this one.”



Jamzilla's massive paving operation took over much of the 405. Metro photo by Gary Leonard

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