

NEWS FOCUS

How Caltrans plans to keep the Olympic wheels spinning

'Big Brother' will monitor L.A. traffic flow

By Richard Levin
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Deep in the bowels of the Caltrans Building on Spring Street, a yellow sign bearing two lines of bold, block-lettered print reveals the sense of urgency that exists behind the door of Room 2000B.

"Traffic Operations Center," it reads. "TOC Operators Only."

Inside is the Caltrans nerve center, where the flow of traffic on the greater Los Angeles area freeway system is monitored on banks of computers, computer terminals, closed-circuit televisions and a wall-size electronic map alight with green, orange and red traffic con-

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dition bulbs. The nerve center identifies hot spots, cools them down by dispatching the necessary personnel and equipment, and informs the motorist where congestion exists through electronic message signs and radio alerts.

1984 appropriately will be the year one of the great fictional characters of the English language comes to life.

And it is equally appropriate

The 1984 Olympics will bring L.A. more than an international athletic and cultural event. They will create countless transportation problems. Today, in the last of our five-part series, we look at how L.A.'s visitors will find their way around town.

that he will thrive where he will be effective most, on the highways of Los Angeles during the year's most spectacular event — the Games of the XXIII Olympiad.

As hundreds of thousands, maybe millions, pour into Los Angeles to watch and be part of the Olympics, Big Brother, yes, indeed,

And talking to you — through the electronic message signs.

You can bet your electronic bugging device that Big Brother won't waste his wattage on such trivialities as car pool information or such homilies as "Don't be fuelish."

The messages, Caltrans officials assure, will convey important traffic bulletins. They will advise motorists of accidents as far in advance as electronically possible and where to turn off to circumvent them.

Unlike author George Orwell's omnipotently sinister Big Brother, this one — at least during those 16 days in July and August — will be omnipotently benevolent, one that will extend a warm, helpful hand in solving and controlling one of the Games' most pressing problems, the safe and swift movement of people from event to event and from day to day.

Besides Caltrans, which plans, designs, constructs, operates and maintains the freeway system, planning will be accomplished by the civic transportation and law enforcement agencies in every municipality involved in the Olympic Games, as well as by those at USC, UCLA and UC Santa Barbara and the Los Angeles Olympic Organizing Committee, represented by George McDonald.

McDonald, a 23-year public transportation veteran, including the last 11 with RTD, is one of the old pros the Olympic Committee has hired to fill vital roles.

As the LAOOC's transportation czar, McDonald's duties are twofold. Besides providing input into overall traffic planning, he is directly responsible for transporting the Olympic family — the athletes, coaches and trainers, Olympic officials and members of the international media — a total that may swell to as many as 25,000 people.

ARA Services Inc., an Olympic sponsor, has been contracted to transport the athletes and their support personnel. ARA and McDonald will pay particular attention to the routing of athletes from Olympic Village to practice to events. Each routing, once finalized, will be classified information and will include at least one alternate route for reasons of security and traffic congestion.

As for the other groups, McDonald says the LAOOC currently is negotiating with the Los Angeles Unified School District to transport the media and will soon decide what to do with Olympic officials. All transportation will be by bus, vans, cars and station wagons and will be paid for by the Olympic Committee.

"The problems will be at the multivenue sites in tight areas," McDonald said. "One is Exposition Park. There you have an Olympic Village, track and field, boxing and swimming. All three are popular events and will draw near-capacity or capacity crowds. Another is Westwood, where there will be another Olympic Village as well as the gymnastics competition and possibly tennis. The third area, while it won't be as severe as the other two, is Long Beach, where the fencing, archery, yachting and volleyball events will be held."

By the time the Olympics begin, Caltrans will have 250 freeway miles "under electronic detection of vehicle movement." In other words, everything west and south of the Santa Ana and Golden State freeways will be wired. Presently, only the 42-mile loop — the area that contains the Santa Monica, Harbor and San Diego Freeways — is on-line.

More than 10 years ago, as part of an experimental project, electronic sensors were inserted into each lane at half-mile intervals within the three-freeway loop. These sensors transmit the traffic flow conditions to

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the electronic freeway map on the Caltrans operations center wall. If traffic flows normally, a green light shows at each sensor location on the map. A flashing red light indicates traffic has slowed down considerably or ceased completely.

If the red light flashes for longer than 30 seconds, Caltrans operators notify the California Highway Patrol, which responds and investigates. Once closed-circuit television cameras are operating throughout the system, a camera will zoom in by remote control and immediately identify the nature and seriousness of the hot spot.

Television cameras already are in place at a dozen locations along the Santa Monica Freeway and will be operational within a couple of months. By the Olympics, Caltrans hopes to have cameras functioning on the San Diego Freeway near Westwood, on the Foothill Freeway, and overlooking the downtown, four-level interchange.

"While we are not making and implementing these technological advancements specifically for the Olympics," says Chuck O'Connell, chief of the Caltrans traffic operations systems branch, "they will greatly benefit the public at that time. The television cameras can save from two to 10 additional minutes and allow us the ability to immediately dispatch what we need to the scene of the incident — paramedics, repair trucks, fire equipment, California Highway Patrol officers. We figure that for every minute saved, we actually save four minutes in delay."

This is of particular interest to McDonald and Ken Wells, ARA's transportation planner, who must get athletes to events on time. In case of impending traffic stoppage on a freeway, an LAOC dispatcher will be alerted immediately and have enough time — as much as 15 minutes before the vehicle is caught in the stoppage, according to McDonald — to contact the driver and instruct him to take the prepared alternate route.

Other precautionary measures will be taken, as well.

"Freeways have shoulders which can be used for emergency access if it comes to that," says McDonald. "Also, as a built-in protection, athletes will be due at their sites 90 minutes before their start times."

Every transportation officer in Southern California will agree they can use all the help they can get to keep the wheels spinning during the Olympics.

"It will press the freeway system to the limits, more so than ever before — and over longer periods of time," says O'Connell.

As it is now, much of the freeway system operates above, at or near capacity for more than half the day

Monday through Friday. So it won't take much to seriously overload the system and turn it into the world's largest parking lot.

"You have to have your head in the sand not to think there will be problems," concedes Caltrans District Director Heinz Heckeroth. "But there are things that can be done to eliminate or at least mitigate some of them."

Among the ideas currently being worked on by Olympic transportation planners are:

- Remote parking areas. The Century Freeway right of way is available and could handle those arriving from southern parts of Southern California.

- A shuttle bus service to move people in and out of Exposition Park, the downtown multivenue that presents the greatest potential congestion problems.

- Rerouting surface streets where necessary. The city already has announced it will close Jefferson Boulevard between Vermont Avenue and Figueroa Street during the Olympic Games. Others will be made one-way.

- Scheduling events at times to avoid peak traffic.

- Coordinating staggered work hours with the business community to alleviate the load on the streets and freeways.

- Educating the public. The Los Angeles Olympic Organizing Committee will issue suggestions, maps and specific traffic plans as part of its package to ticket buyers. A sample suggestion will request motorists approaching the Coliseum area from the west on the Santa Monica Freeway to exit at Vermont Avenue and use surface streets rather than entering the Santa Monica-Harbor Freeway Interchange.

"From 250,000 to 300,000 people enter downtown, roughly the area bordering the Santa Ana and Harbor freeways, during the course of a normal work day," says O'Connell. "While that figure diminishes by about 5 percent in summer because of vacations, part of it is made up by conventioners and visitors.

"The summer traditionally is light on the freeway system. The difference in 1984, however, will be that most visitors will be headed for the Coliseum. We won't have the diverse traffic patterns we're accustomed to. It will be much more concentrated."

Although the remote parking and a shuttle bus system would be a great aid to traffic planners, O'Connell acknowledges it can't be forced to the public.

"It would be optional, of course," he says with a smile. "This isn't Moscow. We can't force people to park miles away and bus to the events. But I believe people will make the switch once they are presented with the full picture."