



NEWS

May 27, 1997

CONTACT: ED SCANNELL/JIM SMART
MTA MEDIA RELATIONS
(213) 922-2703/922-2700
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

MTA PLANNER EYES THE FUTURE OF TRANSPORTATION IN L.A. COUNTY AS THE POPULATION CONTINUES TO GROW

L.A. County's glowing reputation as the land of fun and sun is under siege. The steady growth in population is putting more pollution-spewing cars and trucks on already clogged streets and freeways to the point where soon it may be too tough to get to the fun.

As the growth continues to outpace resources, planners, governmental agencies, and residents alike will have to make some tough choices if Southern California is to head off the drive toward total gridlock.

"Congestion is becoming transit's worst enemy," says Keith Killough, MTA deputy executive officer, countywide planning. "Unfortunately, we don't have as much money for transportation improvements as we anticipated. That means to a large degree we need to make more creative use of the resources we already have or watch traffic on our streets and freeways become even worse."

A longtime advocate of public transportation, Killough says buses continue to form the backbone of the transit system in Southern California, but, more and more, gridlock is compromising their effectiveness. He says at the rate we're going, in the next two decades the average speed of Metro buses will drop from the current 12 miles per hour to below 10 miles per hour.

"The way to get more transit for our money is to speed up the buses, and we can do that by creating more lanes dedicated solely to bus travel," says Killough. "It won't do us a lot of good to put more buses on the streets if they're moving slower and slower and adding to the congestion."

More...

At present, Los Angeles County has less than two miles of bus lanes on surface streets. It may be hard to believe, but the lanes located on Spring Street in downtown L.A. were designated before Killough came to Los Angeles 15 years ago.

What's getting in the way of creating more of the dedicated lanes? Killough says it's the misperception of property owners and merchants along the streets where bus lanes are needed the most. One stretch of Broadway in the downtown area is a good case in point.

"I doubt very many people believe that most customers on Broadway, as well as on nearby Hill Street, get there by automobile," says Killough. "It can take a bus 40 minutes to get from Venice Boulevard to Temple Street because of traffic. In that amount of time the bus could be back in the community providing transportation if we could just move it along a little quicker."

MTA's most recent Long Range Transportation Plan proposed the creation of bus lanes wherever buses run four minutes apart or less. That would amount to 130 miles of bus lanes, something that Killough says is much needed on busy thoroughfares such as Vermont Avenue, a street that points to an interesting contradiction.

"Vermont Avenue is one of the streets where we put more buses than we should need to," says Killough. "Conceivably, with bus lanes we wouldn't need as many buses on those streets because they'd be able to move along much faster. We actually could put some of those buses on other routes."

What's going to happen if we don't create more bus lanes? Killough says as congestion worsens in the years ahead we'll have to add more buses just to maintain the *same* frequency of service. That means we'll be paying more of our tax dollars for less, something that Killough says just doesn't make sense.

More...

In recent years, one of the region's most visible and successful efforts at keeping traffic moving has been the joint MTA/Caltrans HOV (High Occupancy Vehicle, or carpool) project. With the opening earlier this year of a 12-mile long carpool lane on the 118 freeway, 124 miles of the lanes are now in operation in L.A. County.

A problem is looming, however. As carpool lanes become more successful they too will become congested. What to do?

"There's some discussion that eventually we might have to increase the occupancy requirement in carpool lanes to three persons per car," says Killough. "Then they'll probably become somewhat under-utilized, so one option is to let two-person carpool vehicles buy their way in. And there's also been some talk about letting single occupant vehicles buy their way in, although this would lessen the carpool incentive. Whatever number you choose, the buy-in idea simply says that if some commuters want to travel 'time advantaged,' they'll have to pay for it."

Some people may react to this so-called HOT (High Occupancy Toll) lane concept by saying, "So much for the concept 'freeway!'" Killough is quick to reply, "Well, it *is* free, if you're a qualifying carpool...that's what those lanes were built for."

Killough says the HOT lane idea may be one way to pay for improvements on the Santa Ana, Hollywood and Ventura freeways where double-decking (as was recently constructed on the Harbor Freeway) is under consideration.

Another way some people can get around gridlock is to ride bicycles, but the number who choose pedal power in Los Angeles is small.

"Despite having some of the best weather in the country, Los Angeles is not bicycle friendly when compared to cities such as Washington, D.C. and Davis, California," says Killough.

More...

Nevertheless, an estimated 40,000 people in Los Angeles County commute to school and work by bicycle and changes are in the works to make it more bicycle friendly. To date, MTA has helped fund 400 miles of bike routes in Los Angeles County, and it will fund some \$18 million in general improvements for bicycle use in the next two years.

"Our focus has always been to try and encourage more commuter travel by bicycle," says Killough. "In the planning department we probably have a half dozen people who do it every day."

While most commuters are looking for a way to skirt traffic congestion in their cars, an estimated 4 to 6 percent of the workforce earns its living in front of a computer at home. Killough says while it's not a viable arrangement for every employer or self-employed person, "telecommuting has taken some travel off the system, and employers need to realize that just because someone is working at the office doesn't necessarily mean they'll be any more productive there than at home."

Killough points out that while we're quick to complain about traffic congestion, most of us have an amazing tolerance for it. Given that tolerance, the only thing that will get some people out of their cars is a higher cost to drive them.

"People value their personal freedom," says Killough. "There won't be any change unless people realize it's to their economic benefit to do so, and that gets real tricky. Do you impose economic penalties, or do you try and buy them into more efficient modes of travel?"

Not surprisingly, perhaps, Killough favors economic penalties, including higher parking fees, to persuade commuters to get out of their cars. He also believes it should cost more to drive to work than it does to drive to do business or to shop, although in most areas it costs less.

More...

Page 5 Killough

Killough says getting off our collision course with gridlock will take a change in behavior, but most people will ignore a challenge to change their commuting habits.

“Ultimately, change comes when people attempt to maximize their resources,” says Killough. “If you want to see a shift, incentives *and* disincentives are the way to promote that change.”

#