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Road to Recovery? Local Residents, Groups Must Place Priority on Traffic Woes

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By **ROB CARPENTER** and **DAVID MURPHY**

Los Angeles is at a crossroads. Our transportation system is a stunning failure: We have had the worst traffic in the nation for 20 years, we waste \$10.7 billion annually, and we continue to have the worst smog in the nation, primarily because of gridlocked vehicles.

Let's face it: L.A.'s traffic is already the laughing stock of the country and it's only getting worse. We simply haven't built enough infrastructure. The fact is that Angelenos, businesses, civic groups, environmental organizations, labor leaders and others must insist on a transportation system that works for all of us and is accountable to all of us – and we must do it now. Our civic pride, quality of life, economic vitality, and environment are all at stake.

This is why we founded Building LA's Future: Ending Gridlock in Los Angeles. As politicians and social entrepreneurs whose experiences range from the White House and Congress to the Valley Industry and Commerce Association and Teach for America, we recognized that the private and civic sectors have failed to make traffic solutions a priority, thus ceding power to naysayers and obstructionists. And while we both could have comfortably worked in secure, well-paying jobs elsewhere, we love L.A. too much to sit on the sidelines any longer. This is why we launched a non-profit movement to dramatically increase the sense of urgency to tackle gridlock through short- and long- term solutions. This movement, by necessity, should bring together political, business, civic, environmental, and labor leaders and organizations to fight for a fully built-out mass transit system and for adequate funding to improve our crumbling infrastructure. But this won't be easy.

We have seen naysayers and skeptics block progress. James Madison warned in Federalist 10 about the powers of small factions who are "adversed to the rights of other citizens or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community." And modern-day Angelenos have seen needed infrastructure projects sidelined for far too long – and far too often. There has been no significantly powerful voice representing the majority of us who need solutions to our traffic problems. Ironically, although traffic impacts all of us, transportation issues have been without their own powerful, organized constituency.

Collective effort

It will take a collective effort from leaders like Assemblyman Mike Feuer (whom we honored earlier this year as California's first "State Traffic Fighter of the Year"), BizFed Chairman David Fleming (who recently called for a major investment in transit infrastructure at our CEO Breakfast Summit on Transportation) and elected officials like Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa. But we must unite – business leaders and neighborhood council members, homeowners and environmentalists – to fight for the good of the whole. Angelenos are tired of the finger-pointing, and we are tired of the misinformation and misappropriation of funds. We want action, we want change and we need it now. But this won't happen overnight. Only a collective, top-down and grassroots, bottom-up effort that harnesses the energy and creativity of the private, public and civic sectors can move us forward. Without it, we fail. With it, we prosper.

Los Angeles is at this crossroads. We can continue along the status quo and watch traffic get dramatically worse. Or we can unite for change. But the question is how do we build this movement? It starts by giving up our collective defeatism that L.A. must accept permanent gridlock: It is time we say, "Enough is enough." We can do this. We can get a fully built-out mass transit system, just like London, Washington or Hong Kong. We can improve gridlocked freeways and improve streets. But we must insist that our elected officials, business groups, environmental organizations and labor organizers all make investment in transportation solutions the urgent priority it needs to be.

We must write letters to the editor, speak to our legislators, attend town hall meetings and discuss solutions to our gridlock mess. The only way we can reform the system is with a collective commitment to make this a top priority.

We have a unique opportunity and obligation to solve this crisis. We can choose action or talk, consensus or acrimony, success or failure. It is our choice. It is our crossroads. Will we begin to build L.A.'s future? That, of course, only you know the answer to.

Rob Carpenter and David Murphy are social entrepreneurs and co-founders of Building LA's Future: Ending Gridlock in Los Angeles.