

Editorial

Business Takes Wheel on Traffic

By CHARLES CRUMPLEY - 6/16/2008
Los Angeles Business Journal Editor

When it comes to the traffic problem, Los Angeles seems to believe it is stranded in Siberia. The situation is hopeless and the city helpless. Nothing can be done.

So it was invigorating for me to attend last week's rollout meeting of Building L.A.'s Future, a group of mostly business interests that formed recently with the aim of breaking up this city's vehicular logjam.

For once, those of us in the audience didn't hear the usual defeatism about how L.A.'s life-altering traffic snarl is virtually unsolvable. You've heard all the reasons: People won't carpool. It's too late to build meaningful mass transit. My favorite eye-roller: It's futile to build new roads or widen old ones because that would just invite more cars.

Instead, we heard a different message. It went like this: With some ingenuity, some commitment and, yes, some fresh money, L.A.'s traffic problem can be eased, if not solved.

Several speakers pointed out that the task isn't all that huge. Los Angeles doesn't have to reduce the number of cars on the road by 40 percent or even 20 percent. A cut of 10 percent, perhaps less, would be enough to break up the gridlock.

Yeah, it would take some money. Pam O'Connor, Metro board chair, floated the idea of proposing a half-cent sales tax that could help pay for traffic improvements. David Fleming, chairman of the new BizFed, a group of local business organizations, said BizFed would probably support such a tax and he suspects other business groups would, too.

Plenty of ideas were tossed around. Bus lines could be extended and upgraded. Left-turn signals could be installed. One-way pairs of streets created. More traffic lights synchronized. Carpooling incentivized. Roads widened. The subway to the sea built, etc.

There's no shortage of ideas. Just a shortage of will power and political will.

On that last point, a big part of the lack of political will has resulted from the relative absence of the business community in the debate. Oh, sure, businesses complain about gridlock. And they should, since L.A.'s chronic traffic snarls hurt businesses and their workers the most. But businesses have failed to get together and create the urgent drive to solve the traffic

conundrum and give politicians the cover to do it.

It was reassuring to hear David Murphy, one of the organizers of the group, say in opening comments: "It's time to come together as a business community. Enough is enough."

The only part about the meeting that was not reassuring was the lack of Ronald Sugars, Eli Broads and other big business leaders at the meeting, which was touted as a CEO conference. Westside traffic activist Harold Katz pointed out that of the 80 or so folks in the room at the City Club on Bunker Hill, most were from chambers or business groups as well as some governmental people and such.

While it is fine and good that those interested people attended, it's not quite the same as a roomful of enraged CEOs of big companies getting together and pounding the table.

Still, it was refreshing to see business groups start to coalesce around the idea of fixing what may be L.A.'s most vexing problem. And it was even more refreshing to hear the can-do spirit finally start to counterbalance the whining and defeatism. As much as anything, it's the attitude that was the big breakthrough.

You know, we don't have to put up with this. This ain't Siberia. And we're not stranded.

Charles Crumpley is editor of the Business Journal. He can be reached at ccrumpley@labusinessjournal.com.

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