

Road to Recovery? Half-Cent Sales Tax Necessary To Keep Transit System Rolling

6/23/2008

By **PAM O'CONNOR**

Mobility is the linchpin of our economy. But when that pin gets bent by the constant crush of traffic, business and consumers suffer. It now costs people who live and work in Los Angeles County far more in a single year to cope with worsening traffic than to fix it with a new half-cent sales tax measure that would add dozens of new highway and public transit projects financed over a 20- or 30-year period.

A recent report by the American Automobile Association estimates that traffic congestion costs the Los Angeles-Orange counties region \$9.3 billion, plus an additional \$10.6 billion annually due to traffic crashes, a leading cause of congestion. And the transportation research group TRIP says rough roads riddled with potholes cost the average Angeleno \$778 a year in vehicle wear and tear, highest in the nation.

Altogether, this is more than a \$2,000 annual hit for every man, woman and child living in Los Angeles County. On top of that, our average commuter wastes 72 hours a year idling in traffic – three whole days a year breathing exhaust, frustrated because you're separated from home and family, stuck in a virtual parking lot.

These aren't abstract figures. If you're in business, they hurt your bottom line. Trucks can't deliver goods, customers can't get to you and your employees are chronically late. And consumers have less to spend.

The Los Angeles Times recently reported that traffic congestion regularly delays about one-fifth of commercial trucks in the region, increasing the cost of shipping by 50 percent to 250 percent.

As an independent businesswoman and elected official, I can see with my eyes closed this is massive waste that no one can afford. It's time we dealt with our worsening transportation infrastructure and stopped waiting for Sacramento and Washington to dispatch the cavalry.

Metro's new draft Long Range Transportation Plan tells us what we need to do to handle another 2.4 million people living in Los Angeles County by 2030.

This transportation plan prioritizes dozens of new highway and public transit projects throughout Los Angeles County. It calls for more buses and new rail projects, carpool lanes, subsidies for vanpools, synchronized traffic lights, left-turn lanes, beefing up the Metro Freeway Service Patrol, building bikeways and pedestrian improvements, and more.

Much of it is funded; a lot of is not. In fact, it will take about \$60 billion more to implement the plan, which we must do to avoid seeing average freeway speeds dip below 20 miles per hour and a doubling of time wasted idling in traffic.

Hold the line

We can avoid that by fixing potholes and worn-out streets and freeways, and making bridges, tunnels and overpasses safer with retrofitting. And commuters will have rideshare options they don't have today.

That doesn't mean we haven't done a lot already to hold the line on traffic. The Texas Transportation Institute, which annually dubs the L.A. region as having the nation's worst traffic, also has validated Metro's multipronged approach to relieve congestion. We just need to do a lot more for both transit and highways.

There has been growing grassroots support for a new local half-cent sales tax measure for transportation in Los Angeles County including strong business support demonstrated a couple of weeks ago at a business summit organized by Building L.A.'s Future, and a recent voter survey showed widespread support provided that every geographical area benefits.

The tax would generate \$1 billion annually that could leverage billions in other local, state, federal and private sector dollars. The L.A. County Economic Development Corp. estimates transportation construction over 30 years would generate \$32 billion in economic development activity and create 210,000 jobs. LAEDC estimates the tax would cost each county resident only \$25 a year compared with the \$2,000 plus tab we're paying now for traffic and rough roads.

At the June 26 Metro Board meeting I'll ask my fellow directors to have the county supervisors put the sales tax measure on the November ballot. At that same meeting, the Metro Board will consider adopting the Long Range Transportation Plan. The timing is not a coincidence.

We have a plan for dealing with traffic but we need local funds to pay for it. Ignoring the problem doesn't pencil out. Do the math and tell the Metro Board and every elected official you can buttonhole that you're fed up with traffic and demand relief even if you have to pay for it because you're paying too much now to spin your wheels.

Pam O'Connor is chairwoman of the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority board and a Santa Monica City Council member.