

# Fixing California's Transportation System

California Senator Tom McClintock

Date: January 24, 2002

Thank you for your invitation to discuss the transportation crisis in California. The thing that makes it so fascinating to me is how simple the problem is to correct, and how monumentally stupid has been our policy to deal with it during the past 30 years. Throughout the first three-quarters of the 20th Century, policymakers understood the simplicity, the efficiency and the necessity of the individualized transportation system made possible by the automobile.

In 1958, they adopted the most visionary infrastructure plan in California's history that proposed a highway system to link all of the population, commercial and resource centers of the state with this remarkably efficient system - and to do so from existing tax dollars. This highway system was on schedule for completion in the 1980's, until a single climacteric changed everything: the election of Gov. Jerry Brown and his "era-of-limits" "small-is-beautiful" "don't build things and people won't come" new-age nonsense.

We walked away from our highway program, literally abandoning projects in mid-construction. In this region, they canceled the Whitnall Freeway - which was to be the third east-west freeway through the middle of the San Fernando Valley. We already owned the land for that freeway - all that remained was to grade and pave. They canceled the Reseda Freeway, the third north/south freeway for the San Fernando Valley. They canceled the Pacific Coast Freeway from Oxnard to Long Beach in mid-construction. They canceled the 118 freeway from Oxnard to San Fernando in mid-construction. They canceled the Fillmore freeway in mid-construction. They canceled the Long Beach Freeway in mid-construction. It wasn't for lack of funds - it was because of a retrograde ideology that held that the automobile is the root of all evil.

And through two Democratic and two Republican administrations, this basic agenda has not been challenged. Since 1974, the miles driven by Californians have increased 116 percent, while lane mileage has increased just 8 percent.

According to one of Jerry Brown's deputies: "We are prepared to endure considerable outcry in order to pry John Q. Public out of his car."

This policy has reached a new level with the election of Jerry Brown's chief of staff, Gray Davis. Last summer, scant attention was paid when Davis announced that "California's era of freeway construction is over." I suggest to you that this statement ranks with "Let them eat cake," and "Apres nous, le deluge" for sheer irresponsibility and lunacy in public policy.

Well, we stopped building freeways, the people came anyway, and they're still in their cars.

I am here to state what is politically incorrect in bureaucratic circles, but what is self-evident to virtually every motorist on the road today. California policy makers have conducted a 30-year hate affair with the automobile, to the detriment of our economy, our safety, our environment, and our quality of life. And it is time - it is long past time - that Californians kicked them out of office and demanded the highways that we have paid for.

During those 30 years, we have heard the derisive and condescending comments about "Californians' love affair with their cars." California's highway system was not due to an irrational love affair with a machine. It was the simple fact that the individualized transportation made possible by the automobile offers advantages that no mass-transit system could ever begin to duplicate: high-speed, low-cost, doorstep-to-doorstep, 24-hour a day on call service in safety, convenience and comfort, offering infinite flexibility in travel schedules and routes. It was this efficient, adaptable system that made 20th Century commerce possible - and it is the foundation upon which our ability to socially and commercially interact now rests.

But it is not popular with big government. Highly decentralized systems that respond to individual needs are anathema to the manipulative whims of government. Government likes centralized, command-and-control structures that can be dominated politically. Those who have lectured Californians that they have become too dependent on the automobile would rather make them dependent on government-managed mass transit.

So today, the finest highway system in the world is a shambles. It has not been merely neglected. An ideological war has been waged against it. I am here to suggest that it's time that war was joined, and that the ideologues that have destroyed our transportation system be challenged by common sense.

Our plight is not for lack of money. California motorists bear the

third heaviest taxes per vehicle in the country, and yet we rank dead last in our per capita spending for our highways.

In 1990, they doubled the excise tax on gasoline - and promised that money would be used for road construction. In the decade that followed, the miles driven by Californians increased another 30 percent, our lane mileage increased just ONE percent.

The Left likes to argue that government subsidizes the car. The truth is exactly the opposite. The car once paid for all highway construction. Now it is used to subsidize every aspect of the welfare state - except for a decent road system.

In the 1950's and 1960's, virtually the entire California freeway system was constructed from the taxes - lower taxes, I might add - paid by the motorists who used the freeways. Since the 1970's, there has been virtually no new freeway construction. We are carrying 30 years more volume - 116 percent more usage --- on the same road system built by our grandfathers - and paying higher taxes to boot.

The politically correct transportation system is, of course, mass transit. The only problem is that the masses don't use it. And there's a reason. It is inconvenient, it is enormously time-consuming, and most of all, if it wasn't heavily subsidized, it would be cost prohibitive.

Take a look at the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transportation Authority for example. Last year, the MTA consumed \$2.7 billion: \$5,900 annually for every passenger it carried. Last year, they had a 32-day strike. There was no appreciable increase in traffic congestion. There was actually a decrease in air pollution. Even the MTA admitted that 90 percent of its passengers had alternative means of transportation. And for the 45,000 truly transit dependent people in Los Angeles, a low-cost jitney service immediately materialized on every street corner until LA City government aggressively shut it down.

Now, consider this. Shifting just the MTA's mass transit subsidy funds to road construction - at Century Freeway prices - would mean four new lanes on the San Diego Freeway from the Ventura Freeway to the Century Freeway in the first year of savings alone. The next three years could do the same on the Hollywood Freeway from the Ventura to the 605 and on the Santa Monica from the Pacific coast to the 605. Within ten years, 170 miles of congested freeway routes in the Los Angeles area could have four lanes of angioplasty done, using the most conservative possible figures, for the MTA's net operating

costs for mass transit.

For the cost of the 79-mile long Los Angeles Metro-rail, we could have added 618 miles of new freeway lanes to the Los Angeles Freeway system - at Century freeway prices.

Let me ask for a show of hands. How many of you rode on the MTA in Los Angeles last year? How many of you rode on a Los Angeles Freeway last year? Any questions?

A few years ago, I attended a "transit summit," composed of several hundred mass transit advocates throughout the region. There was a bus stop right outside the hotel. I asked these transit officials and lobbyists how many had come by bus. Of roughly 300 in attendance, three hands were raised.

More recently, the director of Rideshare for Los Angeles was asked if she carpooled. She said "No," it seems her schedule was just too unpredictable. Well, welcome to the world.

Four years ago, the San Fernando Valley Industry and Commerce Association conducted a survey of commuter preferences. According to the poll, a vast majority of area commuters want transit service that requires no more than a ten minute wait, stops no more than once on the way home, takes no more than thirty minutes in transit, and charges no more than 75-cents. For a Southern California mass transit system, such demands are impossible. Fortunately, what the public is describing is something they already have: the convenience, versatility and economy of the (politically incorrect) automobile.

But we don't have that system any more because the taxes that once paid for all of our roads now have been diverted to pay for everything except our roads, and specifically to mass transit systems that are wildly unrealistic, hugely inconvenient, and enormously expensive.

There is method in their madness. County Supervisor Roger Niello of Sacramento, a strong advocate for highway construction, told me of his experience at one of these "mass transit summits." There, the speaker said to the approval of the audience, "Remember, gridlock is our friend." If you make the highways impassable, if you make life miserable enough for the single motorist, then people will have no choice but to take mass transit, with all its inconveniences and inefficiencies.

As boring and as politically incorrect as the road system is, it is

the most efficient, most economical, safest, and most environmentally friendly transportation system we have. And if that statement surprises you, it is because of a massive mis-information campaign to which the mass transit lobby has subjected us for a generation.

I have already talked about the economies. The efficiency of doorstep to doorstep service should be obvious to all.

The safety figures are there for the asking. Private automobile traffic has a lower injury and mortality rate per mile traveled than the public mass transit systems in operation today.

But let me also mention the environment, which is the most prevalent excuse we have for California's 30-year hate affair with the car.

Gridlocked automobiles create twice the NOX contaminants and six times the carbon contaminants per mile as those operating at peak efficiency. Think about that. Bringing California's highways back to capacity would be the environmental equivalent of removing half the automobiles from the roads during rush hours for nitrogen oxide and removing five cars out of six for carbon monoxide.

And let me ask you this: does even the most wild-eyed environmentalist ever suggest that these mass transit systems will remove half of the cars from the roads?

Instead of doing the obvious, the big government crowd is suggesting everything but. We are told that we need to expand bus systems, add more light rail, telecommute, offer flex-time schedules, more HOV lanes, and on and on.

We're told, "If you build more lanes, in ten years they'll be as crowded as ever." Listen to the logic of this statement: "Don't build more lanes, people will just use them." Instead, they have squandered billions of dollars on transportation systems people don't use.

We're told, "We can't build our way out of these problems." Well, how would you know, we haven't tried in 30 years. When we kept pace with our needs, congestion was limited to a brief period at the height of rush hour. Now look at us.

We're told, "Freeways will create suburban sprawl." Well, there's a reason for that that has nothing to do with freeways. People don't like living in dense urban cores. It seems they like to have a yard for their kids to play in. And that's why they are willing to endure endless traffic delays to provide that room for their kids. We can

either recognize that and accommodate their needs, or refuse to recognize it and ruin of our standard of living and our quality of life.

It is one of the ironies of human nature that the more we invest in our mistakes, the less inclined we are to admit them.

So let me offer these politically incorrect suggestions:

First, restore highway revenues for highways. I first proposed dedicating our sales taxes on gasoline for our highways three years ago. Today, a similar measure is before us as Proposition 42, and it is a start.

Second, let's ask that MTA and all the other mass transit systems pay for themselves through their own fareboxes, just as we expect highway users to pay for their highways through their gas taxes.

Third, fire the social engineers at CalTrans, update the blueprints for the highway system that our parents and grandparents drafted, and that we were supposed to have in place by now. And then, where it is still economically possible to do so, re-purchase the land and get to work.

This prescription raises a very important practical question: "How?" How do we change the thinking that has dominated transportation policy in this state for nearly 30 years?

I don't have an easy answer to that question. I only have a hard answer to it. We have to change public opinion. We have to confront the mass transit lobby. We have to remove from office an entire generation of Luddites who have an utterly irrational abhorrence for the automobile and a blind faith in 30 years of failed transportation policy.

And that ain't easy. Changing governing agendas is never easy.

But every now and then, change does occur - once the necessity for it overcomes our natural resistance to it.

But here's the tough part - it takes years - sometimes decades of setbacks and disappointments and defeats and routs. It means going out every day into that marketplace of ideas and selling a position that a majority opposes.

But the good news is, the facts are not subtle. This is not a close call. But the facts have to be out there for the people to consider, and that is where we have utterly failed. And as we educate - as we agitate - as we bang our heads against a brick wall - public opinion

will start to stir - glacially at first - imperceptibly at first - then very slowly, then slowly, and then quite suddenly the folly of decades gives way in a climacteric.

The good news is that the public will exercise solid judgment once they are in possession of all the facts. The problem is, all they currently hear is the propaganda of the mass transit lobby.

Change will not originate from within the Capitol building. In order for change to occur inside a Capitol, it must first change outside.

So I must ask you, and your companies, and your organizations, and your clients, What are you prepared to do?

Are you prepared to educate every Californian that in the decade since our road taxes doubled and our driving increased 30 percent, our highways have increased just one percent? Are you prepared to confront the MTA and its clones over the misuse of our highway money? Are you prepared to undertake a steady campaign until every voter is as aware as each of us in this room of the condition of our highway system and how we got there?

Because until you are prepared to do so - things are not going to change. And once you do - it might be years before we see results. And that is not an easy answer. It is a hard and expensive and uncertain answer. But it's the truth and it is time we learned the truth - and acted on it.

What I can promise is that I will continue to press on these issues at every opportunity. And every voice that is raised will bring us closer to the day when all Californians can again enjoy high-speed transportation that is perfectly individualized to meet their precise needs -- that picks them up at their doorsteps and whisks them to their destinations in safety and comfort - whenever they need to go, wherever they need to go.

In short, what we once had, what we foolishly threw away, and what we must restore for our children and grandchildren: the finest highway system the world has known.