



Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority

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# Metro's Highway Program Shifts into High Gear with 18 New Projects Worth Nearly \$1.4 billion Set to Break Ground in 2011

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While public attention remains fixed on the dozen bus and rail projects mandated by L.A. County voters with the passage of Measure R, the half cent sales tax for transportation, Metro is working feverishly on a parallel track to accelerate its highway program.

This year that work will pay off as the agency launches an astonishing 18 new projects worth nearly \$1.4 billion.

The goals are lofty but realistic, said Doug Failing, executive director of highway programs who joined Metro in 2009 following 30 years at Caltrans, most of the last decade as L.A./Ventura district director.

"If you look at the rate of congestion over the last 10 years or so, you'll see that in most major cities in the United States there's been a large increase. But here in Los Angeles we've had a very small increase in the rate of congestion. That's because we've made strategic investments in transportation. It's not one specific project. It's money spent on city streets, ramp metering, signal synchronization. It's all of these things combined, plus the way we're growing our transit service," Failing said.

"What we can do with these projects is to actually reduce the rate of congestion. We would be the very first county in the United States of America to do so."

Among the tools in Failing's arsenal are a vast system of HOV lanes -- 500 miles of them -- the largest freeway carpool network in the nation. Added to the mix is a signal synchronization system that monitors traffic and alters light timing to keep traffic moving. Freeway on-ramp meters regulate vehicle entrance and tone down snarls. Also in abundance are carpools, vanpools and coming soon, ExpressLanes, Metro's first congestion reduction pricing demonstration project, which will offer a system of toll lanes to attract drivers willing to pay to move faster than the flow of traffic on the I-10 and I-110 freeways. The movement of those drivers will likewise increase the speed of traffic in regular unpaid lanes. ExpressLanes is part of the transit plan to make better use of the highways and roads already in place, since there's not much space for building more.

For a transit agency to plan and fund highway construction seems to go against common logic. But Failing said Metro's 18 highway projects will actually enhance the ability of mass transit to do its job well.

"A significant number of the projects we're building this year are HOV lanes or HOV connected. We find that a number of transit providers -- from the Antelope Valley to Los Angeles; from Orange County to Los Angeles -- use HOV lanes for long-distance commutes. HOV lanes increase the efficiency of the buses that travel on them. That's important to both overall traffic and to rubber tire transit."

When a bus filled with commuters moves to HOV lanes, dozens of cars are removed from the freeways. Fewer cars mean improved freeway speeds, which in turn attracts more commuters to transit and loosens up city streets

where Metro buses are stalled in traffic. The emphasis on these projects is not to be taken as a sign that Metro is building highways to encourage driving.

"That's not what we're doing," Failing said. "We're an exceedingly built up environment because of development that has already happened. The investments we're making now are to balance our system and to support those homes that have already been built."

The challenge, as always, is money. And so last spring, at the direction of the Metro Board of Directors, Metro staff began to explore the use of innovative public-private partnerships to accelerate delivery of highway projects that were not fully financed through traditional sources, such as Measure R.

Public-private partnerships are more and more viewed as attractive funding tools for cash-short transit projects. In one common scenario the design of a project is handled by an outside construction company rather than the funding agency. This can speed up the process and, accordingly, reduce costs. Also attractive is the fact that certain project development and implementation risks are transferred to private sector partners who have a vested interest in

making the building process efficient. And if there's potential future maintenance income--as with toll roads or lanes -- there is built-in incentive to complete projects that will be low maintenance down the road.

On the Metro roster for this year are projects designed to enhance an aging highway infrastructure at the same time they expand the capability of existing roadways and better coordinate them with L.A. County's growing network of buses and trains.

The projects include those funded by Measure R, as well as a handful in Metro's Long Range Transportation Plan. Many are sound walls designed to shield surrounding neighborhoods from the buzz of traffic at locations near the I-405, SR-134 and SR-138.

As soon as the end of April or perhaps early May, there could be a ground breaking for an HOV lane on the I-5 near Glendale/Burbank, between SR-134 and Magnolia Boulevard. Also along the heavily congested I-5 Freeway south between L.A. and Orange County, a series of six project segments are planned. The first of the six, the I-5/Carmenita Road Interchange, will start construction this July. (Three additional I-5 projects will begin within 24 months -- one at the end of this year and two midyear in 2012. The last two projects have a scheduled 2013 start date with all projects scheduled for completion by the end of 2016.)

Among other major projects set to break ground this year are a grade separation along the Alameda Corridor east at Baldwin Avenue and the San Gabriel Trench at the Alameda corridor east. As anyone who has traveled these areas knows, they are not just prone to gridlock; they are known for it.

In addition to the 18 projects set to go this year, there are four others that will likely change the face of Los Angeles County mobility in a significant way.

Already under construction and continuing this year is the Sepulveda Pass Improvements project northbound HOV lane on the I-405 between the I-10 and Highway 101. The 405 widening also involves reconstruction of on-ramps, as well as three bridges. It's an essential project, Failing said, because it's the only major corridor between the San Fernando Valley and the Westside, two major hubs for housing and jobs.

While this year's 18 projects and the I-405 are designed primarily to give people a better commute, three other high-profile projects in various planning stages but not yet scheduled, address the demands of commerce -- specifically goods movement from the twin ports of L.A. and Long Beach, the two busiest ports in the country, and goods movement from California's Central Valley, America's bread basket.

The I-710 south from the Pomona Freeway (SR-60) to the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach will involve a freeway widening and possibly a separate freight corridor that could be tolled.

The 710 north gap closure between the I-10 and the I-210 would complete the natural goods corridor that was begun several decades ago. Metro has been holding a series of conversations and outreach with the community, in an effort to collect ideas on best options.

A third, the High Desert Corridor, will be a brand new 63-mile east-west freeway between SR-14 in Los Angeles County and SR-18 in San Bernardino County. It would create a shortcut for goods movement from the Central Valley to the rest of the United States and trim back goods congestion through the L.A. basin.

Like infrastructure investment, goods movement investment is an investment in our future, Failing said.

"What made America great was the building of the system that allowed us to take products to market. America has lost jobs overseas. Even though American workers are still the most productive on the planet, we are not as competitive because we can't move goods within our own country. We need to continue to make these investments so that we can have a healthy economy and we can continue to attract the kinds of jobs that are going to be necessary for us to maintain the standard of living we have."

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