

Honk if You Love Traffic

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Everyone believes Los Angeles is the ultimate in "urban sprawl" -- low density residential and commercial development. And, indeed, Los Angeles covers a lot of territory -- stretching 75 or more miles from Ventura to Beaumont and from Santa Clarita to San Clemente.

But compared to the sparse suburbanization of other U.S. cities over the past 50 years, Angelenos are packed in like sardines. Los Angeles now has the highest population density per square mile.

For example, if Los Angeles followed Portland, Oregon's more sprawling path, the Southland would extend uninterrupted to Mojave, Barstow and Indio. If Los Angeles were developed at the same density as the New York City area, nearly 10 percent more rural land would have been developed.

Most people also believe that Los Angeles is nothing but freeways. The fact that Los Angeles has the nation's worst traffic congestion has led some anti-automobile interests to suggest that freeways are incapable of solving the problem.

However, Los Angeles has less freeway space per capita than most urban areas -- ranking 44th out of the largest 57 urbanized areas in 1996, according to Federal Highway Administration data.

Nashville and Kansas City have approximately double the equivalent freeway lane miles of Los Angeles, and traffic congestion is under control in both locations.

The plain fact is that Los Angeles, with an urbanized area density of 5,800 residents per square mile, has a freeway system that is at least one-third too small to accommodate travel demand.

This did not have to be the case. Decades ago, the California Highway Department planned to build freeways four miles apart that would have provided close access to virtually the entire community.

Unfortunately, special interests and communities opposed the freeways planned in the San Fernando Valley along Reseda Boulevard, Topanga Canyon Boulevard and a mid-Valley east-west route so vociferously that they were canceled, as was a freeway planned for Slauson Boulevard.

Had all those freeways been built, there would be considerably less traffic congestion in Los Angeles today.

Clogged traffic should have been recognized as a conscious choice based upon the freeway development policies that were pursued.

There was also a lot of wishful thinking that didn't materialize. Policy wonks believed the public would abandon their cars in droves and hop on buses or subways. They didn't.

Thirty years of history make it clear -- people love their cars. And it's not just a phenomenon found in Los

Angeles. From Europe to Canada, Australia and New Zealand -- more cars are fighting for space.

It is time that state and local officials recognize the obvious -- that the automobile is here to stay and the number of cars will continue to grow at least at the rate of population growth.

No amount of transit expansion or rail construction is going to change that. Providing transportation for the future means providing for the automobile, pure and simple.

Solving the traffic problem in Los Angeles won't be easy. But it can be done. It means either building more freeways and/or improving efficiency. Politically, the task is daunting.

Practically speaking, adding capacity isn't a problem. For example, in Tokyo, a city that has more people but fewer cars, double-deck freeways are being constructed in the middle of major surface streets, while major downtown streets are double decked. Little additional right of way is required by these approaches. And Paris is beginning to build 60 miles of underground freeways.

Making roadway use more efficient also could be easily solved by adopting the type of road pricing plans that operate in Singapore. During peak periods, car and truck drivers are debited by freeway scanning devices that make toll booths unnecessary.

Making drivers pay more during peak hours would discourage freeway use at the most congested times. That certainly would reduce traffic congestion, but almost as certainly would rile the public who are used to paying for roadways at the gas pump rather than on the highway.

Until the politics changes, traffic congestion will continue to get worse. But if government adopts the current fashionable idea of "smart growth" the worst will happen sooner. Well meaning but naive people believe that such so-called "smart growth" -- increasing densities and restricting growth boundaries -- will reduce traffic congestion.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Traffic congestion in the United States and around the world is worse in more densely populated urban areas. The reason is very simple -- higher population densities mean more cars per square mile, more travel per square mile and thus, worse traffic congestion, not to mention air pollution.

The last thing Los Angeles needs is higher densities. It may seem ironic, but at the end of the 20th century, Los Angeles faces the nation's most severe traffic congestion because it has become too dense and has too few freeways.

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Tasks:

I) Find words or expressions in the text that mean the same as:

- 1) the city with the lowest population density and the largest expansion (para.1.1)
- 2) live together in a very small place (para.1.2) _____
- 3) traffic jams (para.1.4) _____
- 4) cities and towns (para.1.5) _____
- 5) be against something (para.1.9) _____
- 6) traffic jams (para.1.11) _____
- 7) come true (para.1.12) _____
- 8) leave (para.1.12) _____
- 9) expanding public transport (para.2.2) _____
- 10) very difficult (para.2.3) _____
- 11) fees for using a road (para.2.5) _____
- 12) rush hours (para.2.5) _____
- 13) cities with many inhabitants per square mile (para.2.8)

II) Explain the underlined passages in the text in your own words; bear in mind that all the important information must be given in your explanation (who, where, what...):

III) Write a text about the traffic situation in the place where you live (150-180 words)