

DISSOLVING GRIDLOCK



Break the logjam

Politicians should set aside partisanship, drive money toward the state's roads

By GEORGE ARGYROS and GRAY DAVIS

Peak-period traffic -- the twice daily, four-hour crawl we used to call "rush hour" -- robs the average Inland Empire commuter of 55 hours annually. Population and trade growth will exacerbate the congestion. These are nonpartisan issues we must all work together to solve and current fiscal arrangements simply do not provide sufficient funding to correct Southern California's worsening transportation problems.

The federal government isn't paying its share. The Golden State is consistently shortchanged in the allocation of federal transportation dollars. Southern California is the nation's gateway to the Pacific Rim, moving millions of containers between the rest of the United States and our trading partners in Asia.

This flood of trade imposes tens of thousands of truck trips daily on Southern California, straining our transportation network and contributing to traffic congestion and diesel pollution. Instead of investing in the trade infrastructure that makes inexpensive DVD players and cell phones possible, the rest of the country outvotes California and funds its own projects, such as the infamous bridge to nowhere in Alaska.

The state government diverts transportation dollars to address its structural budget shortfalls. Persistent structural problems make balancing the state's budget in all but the best of times a Sisyphean task. Fuel taxes nominally designated for transportation were one of the few sources of nonearmarked funds.

Prop. 42 dedicated fuel taxes to transportation but still allowed the funds to be borrowed during a fiscal crisis. What's missing is a mechanism requiring borrowed funds to be paid back. Fuel taxes alone will never be enough to address the deferred maintenance on the existing transportation system and add sufficient capacity, so it's critical that this baseline funding source be protected.

Local governments have stepped into the gap, but innovative self-help programs are threatened. Riverside County, which has addressed critical transportation needs with a combination of increased sales taxes and Transportation Uniform Mitigation Fee funds, is the best example of active local congestion relief.

The cooperation necessary for such a program, however, may break down under the stress created by the lack of federal and state help. Local politicians and business leaders must keep working together to ensure that these funds are channeled to the intended transportation projects.

Converting our so-called freeways from parking lots back into open roads is not going to be easy. Voters from both parties need to keep the pressure on the federal and state governments to provide stable, long-term financing for transportation issues. And they need to support innovative local funding mechanisms.

With so many commuters losing more hours to traffic congestion than they receive in vacation time, this should be one issue everyone can support.

George Argyros, U.S. ambassador to Spain from 2001 to 2004, and former Gov. Gray Davis are members of the Southern California Leadership Council, a nonpartisan group that supports a "Green Freight Initiative" strategy to reduce congestion while sustaining job growth.