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Credit: Illustration by Jimmy Giegerich

## **\$1.1 BILLION AND FIVE YEARS LATER, THE 405 CONGESTION RELIEF PROJECT IS A FAIL**



ADAM GROPMAN ([HTTPS://WWW.LAWEEKLY.COM/GUEST-AUTHOR/ADAM-GROPMAN/](https://www.laweekly.com/guest-author/adam-gropman/)) x MARCH 4, 2015 ( )



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This past May the project known as the I-405 Sepulveda Pass Improvement Project came to official completion, with resulting new on-ramps and off-ramps, bridges and a northbound 405 carpool lane stretching 10 miles between the 10 and 101 Freeways.

The four-turned-five-year, \$1.1 billion project became a long-running nightmare of sudden ramp closures, poorly advertised by Metro and made all the worse by baffling detours that led drivers into the unfamiliar Bel Air Hills and Sherman Oaks hills, dead ends and unlit canyons.

As Metro's closures and delays reached their height in 2013, *L.A. Weekly* encountered stranded motorists merely by following Metro's official detours — which in many cases were roads to nowhere. And it isn't over in the Valley or on the Westside. Sudden ramp and lane closures are still hitting motorists at Getty Center, Valley Vista, Skirball Center and elsewhere as work on the officially completed project grinds on.

There is one crystal-clear improvement: With barricades gone and ramp closures less frequent, commuters are at least getting relief from problems Metro itself created — particularly its widely mocked detours, which proved indecipherable on its website and could not be explained by road crews. Now, says Brian Taylor, director of UCLA's Institute of Transportation Studies, commuters who had to leave home “at 5:15 a.m.” during the five-year rebuilding are “leaving at 7.”

But the \$1.1 billion question hangs in the air: Is the 405 any more relieved of congestion than when Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, Congressman Brad Sherman and County Supervisor Gloria Molina demanded in 2006 that L.A.'s “fair share” of state bond money be used to add carpool lanes to the 405?

The answer is no.

A traffic study by Seattle-based traffic analytics firm Inrix has shown that auto speeds during the afternoon crawl on the northbound 405 are now the same or slightly slower — the maddening 35-minute tangle between the 10 and the 101 is actually a minute longer.

More worrisome is the morning southbound logjam. It's so bad, post-improvements, that when Caltrans issues its “worst bottleneck” rankings in August, unofficial data suggest that the 10-mile stretch of the 405 between the Valley and the Westside could be the worst freeway segment in California.

Urged in 2006 to act in the name of “congestion relief” by Villaraigosa, Sherman, Molina and labor leaders, then-Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed SB 1026, placing the 405 carpool project at the front of the line for Proposition 1B transportation bond money.

Villaraigosa was particularly ardent, repeatedly making statements such as, “Make no mistake, this is going to be an important contribution for reducing congestion on the 405.”

Those who endured five years of disruption were assumed to be sacrificing in large part to give L.A.'s workforce a needed carpool lane. Metro and Caltrans cut away a vast tonnage of rock in Sepulveda Pass to make room for the storied carpoolers.

But longtime statistics had already shown that not many people would form carpools.

“Conceptually, there's little reason to think that just adding another lane, even a carpool [lane], is going to noticeably reduce traffic,” says Michael Manville, assistant professor of city and regional planning at Cornell University. “This is a project that has very high and very certain costs. But the benefits are much less certain.”

On a purely personal level, losses to residents were high. The Texas Transportation Institute says that every hour a person sits in traffic tie-ups costs an average of \$16.79 in extra fuel and lost time.

What unfolded during five years of 405 reconstruction “seems a very large cost for not very much gain,” says Bob Poole, director of transportation policy at Reason Foundation.

A number of studies have shown that carpooling is declining even as carpool lanes are added, often to the exclusion of other major transportation projects.

Metro's board, made up of 13 politicians and their appointees, represents all 88 cities in Los Angeles County but is dominated by the city of Los Angeles and its mayor. Powerful L.A. leaders wanted a 405 carpool lane — and they got one.

Their claims of “congestion relief” weren't based on prevailing research, and the Metro board knew that. One of the most detailed studies of work-bound carpoolers, by Nancy McGuckin and Nandu Srinivasan, showed that in 2001, 83 percent of such carpools consisted of members of the same family, and 74 percent of “work tour” carpoolers — a broader definition that includes commuters who stop for errands or drop people off on the way to work — consisted of people from the same household.

Carpooling has been dying off in Los Angeles since 1990, even as local and regional leaders continue to spend enormous sums creating a vast carpool system.

A longtime critic of carpool lanes, Poole suggests that the only path to congestion reduction is to convert some 405 lanes to pay-per-ride FasTrak lanes, such as those on the 10 and 110. He says Metro also would “actually generate some revenue to offset the huge cost. In Miami it's been a huge success.”

### *“Make no mistake*

According to Cornell's Manville, a FasTrak is not likely to happen. “Most of the time, when you meet the enemy, it is us,” Manville says. “The powers that be deal with political constraints and they're not going to get permission to put tolls on the 405.”

Another reason the 405 seems as bad as ever has little to do with carpooling and is related to how motorists behave when a roadway opens up a bit thanks to improvements.

Faced with a badly congested freeway, commuters will start to seek alternatives on different roadways, by choosing earlier or later travel times or a change in mode of transportation. Eventually, the area's transport grid reaches an equilibrium.

But after a project improves the roadway, drivers come back from the side streets. Off-peak commuters return to peak times. Public transportation riders switch back to driving. The transportation term is “triple convergence,” and it helps explain how beneficial effects from the 405 project are likely invisible to the casual observer.

**Whatever else is** true, despite its billing the 405 reconstruction did not take on the fundamental problems in the Sepulveda Pass Corridor, which according to Metro historically has been the most congested highway segment in the United States.

Daily, tens of thousands of motorists pour out of the San Fernando Valley and down through the pass, bound for jobs to the south. Drivers have very few routes by which to cross the Santa Monica Mountains. On the city side, the 405 is affected not only by people squeezing north through Sepulveda Pass to return home but also by a tremendous afternoon flow of eastbound cars leaving coastal L.A.

The interrelated backups have complex causes, among them the key job centers in Santa Monica, Playa Vista, El Segundo and environs; the inability of the eastbound 10 to handle the home-bound surge inland; and the limited capacity of the Westside's east-west surface roads, with Santa Monica Airport acting as a permanent obstacle. And, of course, the few routes to the Valley over the mountains.

UCLA's Taylor says that beyond its widening to allow carpool lanes, the 405 project had other important justifications, including the rebuilding and seismic strengthening of decaying old freeway surfaces, bridges and underground utilities.

"If the standard of this reconstruction is clear streets during rush hour, that was not going to happen," says Taylor, who adds, "There's a concept called 'latent demand' by which you have a congested roadway, you add some lanes, it opens up running more smoothly, and then it gets back to where it was before."

Today, Metro points out that it has at least increased the 405's exiting flow with its soaring freeway ramps at Wilshire and Sunset boulevards and much-improved new bridges at Sunset, Skirball Center and Mulholland Drive.

Metro gets some support in this view from Rod Liber, of the Brentwood Homeowners Association, who says, "Exiting the 405 on Wilshire is more civil now. The overpasses eliminate the mixing of on-traffic with off-traffic. However, with Sunset there's no way to synchronize the lights to keep the traffic moving."

But Sunset Boulevard has seen "mild, not substantial, improvement," says Liber, its prodigious backup still snaking west as far as the Brentwood business district and east past UCLA as cars try to access the still-stoppered 405.

A Metro spokesman suggests that the 405 widening project's failure to cut congestion is partially or even largely about the economy.

Metro spokesman Dave Sotero says there was simply less traffic "in the pit of the Great Recession," and the project can't expect to offset the increased traffic that has materialized thanks to L.A.'s employment rebound and lower gas prices.

Will the next economic downturn or the current spike in gas prices provide any of the congestion relief Los Angeles leaders promised?

Sotero predicts at least some congestion relief from the new northbound 405 carpool lane, which he says will boost carpooling, van pooling and bus riding. He points to the Valley-Westside Express, a new nonstop bus using the carpool lane between Westwood and the Valley's popular Orange Line, a dedicated busway.

Jay Beeber, a film producer who ran this month for L.A. City Council District 4, which sprawls from Sherman Oaks over the Hollywood Hills to Miracle Mile, asks, "If they're doing all this work, why didn't they put in a dedicated transit line, like the Orange Line? ... With two additional paved lanes, we could have solved a lot of our traffic problems commuting in the morning."

Austin Beutner, now CEO of the *Los Angeles Times* but previously a Los Angeles deputy mayor, has said that Metro didn't proceed intelligently, spending the state 1B bond money and federal funds on inefficient carpool lanes instead of using the widening of the 405 to place a commuter train down its middle.

Beeber suggests the 405 widening failure shows that L.A.'s political class can't think outside the box.

"They say that a train running through the Sepulveda Pass, for instance, [will not happen for] 20 or 30 years. I don't know why it takes so long, and yet we all kind of accept that it does." He cites another idea long used in cities such as Seattle, but still not a serious plan in L.A.: reversible lanes on Sepulveda Boulevard, the snarled 405 frontage road whose backup switches direction from morning to evening.

With traffic jams as bad as ever, Metro may have a hard time selling other projects to residents expected to sacrifice for the greater good. Many still dish on Metro's bizarre detours and incomprehensible closure notices.

One unusual car “trap” that gained a certain infamy was at the Santa Monica Boulevard northbound entrance to the 405. There, Metro encouraged motorists to enter what appeared to be the under-construction northbound freeway ramp. In fact, it was really a cordoned-off, 55-minute waiting line into which unsuspecting drivers were herded.

People who had a family emergency or needed to use the bathroom were simply out of luck.

Marc Danziger, a technology strategist from Torrance, who got caught in the trap one Friday night, explained at the time, “They had created a little channel with concrete barriers and have us locked in this one lane along the road's shoulder. ... All that traffic going north from Santa Monica Boulevard, both directions from Wilshire, and more, are channeled into this one-lane 'canal' they've built.”

It took him 55 minutes to creep one mile in the trap, after which he was finally allowed to merge onto the 405 near Montana Avenue. Just close the on ramp, Danziger said. Don't trick people into a one-hour delay.

At the time, Sotero explained of Metro's controversial planning that the city of Los Angeles also reviewed its detours. But what was considered “logical for a motorist, we wouldn't necessarily recommend, because we don't want to send masses of humanity down local streets. ... There are rules about that stuff — which you can ask Caltrans about.”

The lack of discernible congestion relief on the 405, after so many prominent and public promises were made, cannot be seen as good advertising for Metro as it prepares to ask Los Angeles County residents for yet another tax hike to pay for transportation and transit projects.

Known as Measure R2, the proposed sales-tax hike aiming for the 2016 ballot is currently conceived as lasting 45 years. The players gathering support for it also pushed the 30-year Measure R sales tax hike, approved by voters for transit projects in 2008, as well as the Measure J sales tax hike for transit projects, which voters defeated in 2010 —and the \$1.1 billion Sepulveda widening project.

Beeber, best known as the activist who ended L.A.'s hated red-light camera program, argues, “The failure of Measure J highlights the deep skepticism the public has with regards to how efficiently their tax dollars will be used. We just spent five years and over \$1 billion reconstructing the 405 through the Sepulveda Pass and all we have to show for it is an additional carpool lane and some improved exit ramps. That's not nothing, but most drivers don't perceive any major difference in their motoring experience.”

A major goal of Measure R2, though still under discussion, could be construction of a huge tunnel through Sepulveda Pass running roughly parallel to the 405 and containing a “multideck” highway. One government consultant has suggested this could cost \$6 billion to \$20 billion and take decades to build.

Its goal: congestion relief on the 405.

*(An earlier version of this story said the Metro board has 14 members. The number is 13.)*

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