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From the Los Angeles Times

Candidates overlook traffic issue

As the presidential hopefuls jet in and out of California, one of its top concerns lies beneath their radar.

By Steve Hymon

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It's been candidates gone wild here in Southern California in recent days, as some of those aspiring to be the next president have been jetting in and out of the region in preparation for Tuesday's big primary.

The key word there: jetting. These aren't folks who have to worry about traffic.

You would think that something affecting millions of voting Americans would top the list of talking points for every one of the candidates. Yet most of those stumping for the nation's highest office have offered little more than platitudes: When it comes to transportation, they're basically for it.

What could a president of the United States really do to improve your commute?

The question resonates in Southern California, the longtime champion of primal-scream traffic. In recent years, the issue has been pretty much left up to local and state pols and their ever-shrinking pots of money.

If you can read this while driving today, then you know what a great job they've done.

But there was a day when getting around town was a presidential concern. It reached its nexus in 1956 when [President Eisenhower](#), still irked over a slow cross-country drive decades earlier, signed the [Federal-Aid Highway Act](#).

At the time, Ike promised that the new roads would bring "greater convenience, greater happiness and greater standards of living" to Americans. There are about 47,000 miles of freeways today, with 2,456 miles of them in California. The feds paid for the bulk of those, and it's hard to imagine a bill that was more transformative -- both for better and worse.

The interstates made long-distance travel easy, divided some cities, united others, shifted freight from the rails to the roads and made it possible to live farther from work. They have been praised as an economic boon, criticized as an environmental nightmare and everything in between.

In short, the interstates changed the American landscape.

Where they stand

Sens. Hillary Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama have indicated that they want more mass transit. Former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney and Sen. John McCain have said little on the topic, although Romney has said he wants to drill in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to lessen dependence on foreign oil.

And Rep. Ron Paul? Well, he likes home schooling -- which, I suppose, could diminish the number of school buses on the road.

Then there's former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, who has said he wants to add lanes to I-95 on the East Coast. If traffic in New Jersey is killing you, then Huckabee is your man.

Curious over whether the presidential candidates had indeed clocked out on the issue of traffic, I began calling the experts and asked: What can a president do?

Andy Busch, a professor of government at Claremont McKenna College, pointed out that it's the executive branch that gets to write the big transportation bills that dole out federal funds every few years. But members of Congress have taken to loading up those bills with their pet projects -- 6,300 such "earmarks" were in the \$286-billion bill signed by President Bush in 2005.

"If a new president came into office and made it a priority to revise the way that we spend our transportation funds and if the president spent an enormous amount of energy and political capital trying to make it happen, it might," Busch said.

But that's easier said than done, he added. Congress likes its earmarks, and there are sexier issues with a more national scope, such as immigration and tax cuts.

Over at the Rand Corp. in Santa Monica, Martin Wachs said he has been pondering the question. The Clinton campaign asked Wachs to help write a policy paper on transportation, and he agreed on the condition that he didn't have to endorse her.

Wachs summed up the challenge for the next president: increase mobility for the nation while trying to tackle global warming. That's a tough nut, as transportation produces one-third of the greenhouse gases released in the U.S.

"I don't think she or any of the candidates have said enough to satisfy me," he said. "Of course I am a specialist in this field and take a deep interest in it. But I would have hoped for more from her and all the other candidates."

Some suggestions

A federal commission released a [big report](#) last month on the nation's transportation. The conclusion: The country needs to invest \$225 billion a year for 50 years in all forms of transit.

With the federal highway fund about to go broke, the commission also recommended raising the federal gas tax 5 to 8 cents a year for the next five years. Now there's an idea a presidential candidate can really get behind! Yeah, right.

Both the report and the experts I talked to mentioned several things they'd like to see. Some suggested more help with mass transit. Improving rail freight and fixing the nation's air traffic

control system were big. The one that came up most was for the feds to help big cities -- where the traffic is -- implement tolling to better manage demand on roads.

In fairness, the scrum that is the westbound 10 Freeway each morning is not exactly the nation's highest priority problem. On the other hand, do you really want things to get worse traffic-wise?

"Policy-wise, the interstate system is done, and we need to do something else," said Randy Rentschler, legislative director for the Metropolitan Transportation Commission in the Bay Area, where traffic also stinks.

"If you're L.A. or San Francisco and you're still paying gas taxes and you can't build any more freeways, does that mean you get nothing?" he added. "We've been skating along with a lack of focus for 20 years."

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And so it begins. Every Monday in this space, I get to write about traffic, commuting and all sorts of related issues. I spent the last three years trying to explain the actions of the L.A. City Council, so this should be easy.

But I need your help. If you've got an idea, question or simply feel the need to electronically rant or rave about your travels in the Southland and the state, the e-mail address is below.

Next week: How to properly curse at traffic signals.

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