

More Choices, Less Traffic - Achieving Greater Efficiency & Equity from California's Transportation Investments

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Executive Summary

This [framing document](#) describes the interrelation of transportation investments and land use patterns that are behind California's congestion woes, and then suggests an alternative path forward -- one in which per capita VMT reduction is a central strategy. It then describes the numerous co-benefits besides curbing congestion and improving mobility that go hand-in-hand with such a reduced VMT scenario, and recommends an intersectional, cross-jurisdictional, equity-enhancing approach as having the most potential to improve lives.

It presents evidence and case studies to support the following policy recommendations:

1. Prioritize investments in sustainable mobility options, and stop the misguided practice of adding road capacity in the name of congestion relief in urban, high-growth areas. Due to induced travel, urban highway expansion does not relieve congestion nor improve mobility in the long-run, and by increasing VMT, it runs counter to our climate goals. VMT reduction is crucial to meeting our climate goals and relieving congestion. Instead, we should invest in transit and other sustainable transportation modes, both for their social equity benefits and as a more enduring strategy to reduce VMT.
2. Align California's transportation investments with its climate goals. With better informed and performance-driven funding decisions, we can better serve Californians and shift transportation dollars away from inefficient, sprawl-oriented highway expansion projects towards sustainable mobility options, including transit and active transportation. In order to reduce VMT, people need viable alternatives that are safe, convenient and affordable. Investments in mobility options other than single-occupancy vehicle use should be prioritized.
3. Ensure that investments in sustainable mobility modes are accompanied by robust strategies to minimize displacement pressures. Doing so preserves transit ridership and delivers important mobility, equity, public health and environmental gains.

Below is a summary of the framing document by section headings, including a brief synopsis of the topic covered.

Background -- the interrelated problems associated with increased VMT

Roads are congested

California urban centers are some of the most congested in the nation, worsening quality of life for Californians.

VMT per capita is increasing

VMT per capita increased by .8% in California from 2012 to 2016.

Autonomous vehicles impact to VMT and congestion is uncertain

Autonomous vehicles (AVs) are expected to increase car travel and road congestion, although policies and market mechanisms, such as promoting ride-pooling and connections to transit service, could curb the growth in VMT.

Adding road capacity in congested, high-growth areas does not reduce congestion

More road capacity induces demand for driving, increasing overall VMT.

Highway expansion continues

From 2012 to 2016, urban highway expansion has increased in California by 10.2% or 1,516 urban highway lane miles, and this expansion is costly to maintain-- the added roadway can cost up to \$97.4 million annually in maintenance costs.

Budget squeeze on other modes

Excessive highway expenditures reduce the availability of money to spend on other modes of transportation, limiting transit-dependent populations' mobility and limiting safety improvements for pedestrians and cyclists.

Highway expansion induces sprawl

Land development spurred by highway expansion projects pushes people far from urban centers and infringes on natural and working lands, diminishing wildlife habitat, ecosystem services, and limiting food production, among other impacts.

Displacement

Housing shortages are pushing low-income households, who have the highest rate of transit ridership, far from job centers and transit options, hurting their mobility and lowering their quality of life.

Poor health outcomes from lack of physical activity, air pollution, and motor vehicle injuries

Driving is strongly linked to increased obesity rates and other health issues from transportation emissions and motor vehicle collisions, costing the SCAG region alone over \$8.5 billion annually.

Climate pollution is on the rise

To meet California's 2050 GHG emission reduction targets, there must be a 15% reduction in total light-duty VMT below the trajectory that currently-adopted RTP/SCSs have us on, in addition to cleaner cars and fuels.

Solution -- improving accessibility & the many co-benefits of a reduced VMT future**Reducing VMT can help us build better corridors**

Active transportation, ride-sharing, and public transit systems, such as Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) in Los Angeles, have proven to reduce road congestion and travel time for both transit users and drivers.

Reducing transportation burden of long commute times means more time for other, more rewarding activities

Shorter commute times lessens the opportunity cost of commutes, provides mental and physical health benefits, increases work productivity, lowers insurance premiums, and enables commuters to spend more time on desired activities.

Increasing accessibility to essential services improves equity

Lower barriers to accessing transit, shorter commutes times, and more affordable compact development increases access to opportunity, especially for low-income and minority populations.

Curbing sprawl conserves open space

By focusing development in transportation-efficient land use patterns, we can curb outward sprawl and conserve natural and working lands. Urban Growth Boundaries have been one effective way to do this.

Reduced VMT and active transportation benefits to public health

Achieving California's goal to double walking and transit trips and tripling bicycling by 2020 will result in 2,095 fewer deaths annually from increased physical activity, but there must be infrastructure investments in active transportation to accommodate this mode shift and keep people safe.

Reduced VMT reduces exposure to collisions

More public and active transportation use and less sprawl will decrease driving and, by effect, collision rates, as automobiles have a 10 times higher traffic casualty rate per mile than public transit.

Action -- must be intersectional, equity-enhancing, and coordinated across jurisdictions

Action to achieve VMT reduction should be approached in an intersectional way and prioritize vulnerable communities; if implemented in an equity-enhancing way, this approach will improve mobility and lead to a more just California.