

“Riverside County Pressures O.C.: Help Our Commuters”

Officials set agenda with proposals: Build new Roads, buy toll road lanes, but make plans to end traffic jams now.

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Latasha Jimerson is enveloped in a sleepy sense of dread each morning as she and her husband, Micky, start their predawn crawl to Orange County.

With their infant daughter buckled into the back seat, a Bible on Latasha's lap and thousands of other drivers jockeying for position around them, the Jimersons' Ford Escort eventually merges with a 20-mph caravan of cars headed west on the Riverside Freeway.

"It's miserable," said the 24-year-old Moreno Valley resident. "We spend so much time commuting, our odds of getting in an accident are that much higher. I look at the other drivers and they're all sleepy. And we have a 7-month-old in the car. It's just so stressful."

The Riverside Freeway--these six lanes of asphalt heading west--connect the Orange County job market with workers who live in neighboring Riverside County. For some it is a case of affordability and housing. For others, it's a lifestyle decision. Either way, the daily commute is a misery.

So legendary, so hellish is the drive that Riverside County officials--prodded by enraged constituents--are determined to end the gridlock. That effort has taken two controversial forms so far.

First, they are pushing to shut down the 91 Express Lanes, a 10-mile private toll franchise that operates on the freeway median, and open the lanes to the public. Riverside County officials say the state made a deal with the devil when it approved the franchise because the toll road profits from gridlock. The more clogged the freeway, the better the odds the tollway will attract customers.

And second, Riverside County officials are moving into high gear on a proposal to bore a new freeway through the mountains of the Cleveland National Forest and into Orange County--a plan that has left environmentalists aghast.

Meanwhile, in stark contrast, the Orange County Transportation Authority has yet to act on the issues, a circumstance that some blame on the authority's lack of a permanent CEO. Riverside officials admit they've been more proactive than Orange County, but deny they're calling the shots. "I wouldn't say we're running the show, but we are setting the agenda," said Bob Buster, a Riverside County Transportation Commission member and county supervisor.

At least one Orange County transportation official admits that the failure to act could carry dire economic consequences for Orange County. Many of the commuters who travel the freeway are Orange County employees who have sought cheaper housing in the Inland Empire--a trend that threatens to double daily vehicle traffic along the freeway in 20 years and cut the already sluggish speeds in half.

"We need to support the people who commute to Orange County. It's through them that we derive our economic prosperity," said OCTA board member and County Supervisor Todd Spitzer. "But we don't have a road map or a game plan."

In the case of the Jimersons--who once rented in Garden Grove but moved east to Riverside in search of cheaper housing--the commute has already proved too much. Micky Jimerson now plans to quit his job as a cashier in Orange to work closer to home. Latasha Jimerson will leave her job at a cable TV company and return to school.

"My wife just hates this commute," said Micky Jimerson, 26. "The only reason we can put up with it right now is that we know we're going to end it shortly."

Riverside County officials insist that the first step in clearing congestion along the route is opening the 91 Express Lanes.

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Drivers on the Express Lanes system, which opened in 1995, carry radio transponders that are scanned as their cars glide through checkpoints. The toll--as high as \$3.50 during rush hour--is electronically charged to the driver's account.

Toll road owners say they're practically giving customers their own private lane where they can sail past commuters and cut 20 minutes off their drive.

Riverside officials, though, say the toll lanes actually prevent them from widening the freeway. Under the toll road's franchise agreement with Caltrans, the state cannot make improvements to the freeway that might reduce toll road use, unless the improvements are for safety reasons. If the freeway is improved to the point that it is free-flowing, the argument goes, then the toll roads would suffer.

Next week, lawyers for Riverside County will argue that it was illegal for the state to permit the Express Lanes to build in the median. "The state was supposed to hold that land in public trust; it can't turn it over for private profit," said Jeffrey V. Dunn, a lawyer for the county.

Riverside County officials hope that the state or a nonprofit agency eventually will buy the toll lanes and scrap the noncompetition agreement.

"If it were up to me, I'd buy the lanes and open them all up to the public," said Assemblyman Rod Pacheco (R-Riverside). Pacheco wants the state to estimate the value of the toll operation as a first step in finding a buyer.

More than a few commuters support the idea. "The state should buy it back no matter what the cost," said Bill Gorajia, 63, of Corona. "They are obligated to do that because

they have made such a stupid, stupid mistake. Why would anyone sign a contract in favor of a toll road and prevent yourself from doing anything?"

The owner of the 91 Express Lanes, California Private Transportation Company LP, says the toll lanes are not for sale, although it did consider a sale last year for roughly \$200 million. Also, according to the company's general manager, Greg Hulsizer, opening the lanes to all traffic would be a mistake. "It would be immediate gridlock," he said.

Hulsizer and other toll road supporters take issue with the notion that the toll lanes cause gridlock. "It's important to remember that these lanes wouldn't even be there if private investment hadn't paid for them," Hulsizer said.

Some believe the ultimate solution is a new freeway through the Cleveland National Forest.

That proposal, though, is fraught with complications, including potential opposition from the Transportation Corridor Agencies, which maintain the private lanes in Orange County. The tollway operators in Orange County have noncompetition protection as well. If Riverside were to build a road through the mountains, it potentially could cut toll business in Orange County.

This hurdle, however, probably would pale in comparison to environmental opposition.

"This freeway would spawn the mother of all conservation versus development battles," said David Hogan of the Center for Biological Diversity. "The area they want to build in is already ground zero for sprawl-induced wild habitat destruction."

While Riverside officials are busily lining up support for the mountain route, Orange County officials fear that furor over the connection could interfere with their own plans to build another road through the county's back country--the Foothill South toll road.

"Our focus and priority right now are getting the Foothill South built," said Susan Withrow, a member of both the Orange County Transportation Authority and the county's toll road agency.

Lastly, there's the cost of the proposed route--\$3 billion. Riverside County officials recently secured \$1 million from the federal government for environmental planning, but still need another \$6 million to complete that work.

In the meantime, commuter frustration continues to grow. Orange County and Riverside County transportation leaders had been scheduled to meet on the 91 Freeway issue, but later canceled the plans. OCTA officials say they are now arranging a retreat to determine just where they stand on the issue.

Lawyers representing Riverside County in the court battle over the toll lanes say they're very confident of their case.

"I know I can win this one if I get in front of a jury," said Dunn, the Riverside County attorney. "There are no 12 people alive who will say this toll road is a great thing."