

## ***“Political Sig Alert”***

### ***O.C., Riverside Must Resolve Traffic Problem***

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If ever there was an example of growth turning a local problem into a regional one it's the Riverside Freeway, especially the stretch running from Orange County through the Santa Ana Canyon into Riverside County.

What complicates the search for solutions, aside from the complexity of the problem that it goes deeper than just traffic congestion, is the number of government entities that must in some way be involved in the decision.

The bureaucratic traffic jam includes the Orange County Transportation Authority, the Orange County Board of Supervisors, the Riverside County Transportation Commission, the Riverside Board of Supervisors, the Legislature, federal and state transportation officials and agencies, particularly the U.S. Forest Service, which manages the Cleveland National Forest, as well as possible city, special district, private and community environmental watchdog groups.

Riverside County transportation officials, to their credit, have taken the initiative thus far in pushing for action that could not only improve the Riverside Freeway link between the counties but study other possible new corridors to move traffic and ease the Riverside Freeway bottleneck.

Possible new routes identified by Riverside include a connection from Cajalco Road in Corona to the Foothill Tollway; a road in the area of Ortega Highway between Lake Elsinore and San Juan Capistrano; and a new route between Temecula and San Clemente.

The Riverside Freeway canyon corridor carries nearly a quarter of a million motorists each day commuting between their jobs in Orange County and its high-cost housing and their more affordable homes in Riverside communities.

It is believed that the rush hour on the Riverside Freeway through Santa Anna Canyon starts earlier than most anywhere in the state, around 5 a.m. But “rush” hardly describes the traffic flow. Speeds on the westbound morning commute are about 25mph. That, however, is not as bad as it promises to get.

Projections from a recent regional transportation study see Orange County's job growth as being nearly triple that of its population growth by 2020 - a condition that will nearly double the canyon traffic. That will slow the commute speed to about 10 mph and add hours to time already being spent on the road between Orange County's jobs and its bedroom communities in Riverside.

To get at the root cause, Orange County obviously must build more affordable housing - and Riverside County must attract more jobs. But they also must aggressively attack the freeway bottleneck and seek alternate routes to the canyon commute.

Riverside officials have been quicker to respond. In addition to devising new routes and studying alternatives, they have sued the state to remove the roadblock to road improvements posed by the ill-advised, "noncompetition" clause in the contract on the private toll lanes.

State Sen. Joe Dunn (D-Santa Anna), although reluctant to criticize Orange County officials, said the issue hasn't been receiving the "highest priority" that he thinks it should. "It's a critical problem that's going to be facing Orange County business," Dunn said.

OCTA is starting to stir. It recently met with Riverside Transportation officials and has now ordered a study to gauge public sentiment on one possible new road connection between the counties through Cleveland National Forest.

But these are just preliminary stages, and the counties are far from having the unified voice need to keep them from experiencing even more urban ills.

These preliminary steps are encouraging signs that Orange County indeed finally is giving the regional traffic-housing imbalance the higher priority it deserves – from both sides of Santa Ana Canyon.