

America's great headache

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California shows that road pricing looks the most promising way to stop congestion. But suburban Americans have the traffic they deserve

WHAT is the price of America's love affair with the car? According to a recent "urban mobility study" from the Texas Transportation Institute, it adds up to \$63.1 billion a year (plus another \$1.7 billion if the latest petrol prices are included) in wasted time and fuel. Most drivers would add an emotional cost in frayed nerves. After all, who wants to spend 44% of their daily commute—the figure for the regions around Los Angeles and Washington, DC—in a crawl?

Most sufferers have no choice. As cities sprawl first into suburbs and then into car-dependent "exurbs", the daily commute becomes an ever more painful fact of life. According to the Census Bureau, Americans spend more than 100 hours a year commuting to work; and the annual delay for the typical rush-hour traveller in metropolitan areas of more than 3m has grown, since 1982, from 16 hours to 47.

What, if anything, can be done about it? For an answer, look at California, home to 23m licensed drivers and 33m vehicles, and where "you are what you drive": Arnold Schwarzenegger has gas-guzzling Hummers, while immigrant Mexican gardeners have to make do with decrepit Chevrolet pick-ups. California's network of suburbs and "edge cities" has become the model for much of the growth around the rest of the country.

According to the Texas researchers, the average driver in LA spent 93 hours stuck in traffic in 2003 (see table). By contrast, a driver in New Orleans spent just 18. Whether it is the ghastly I-405 clogged up around Los Angeles airport, or the I-101 tailback from San Francisco's Bay Bridge, California boasts the worst traffic congestion in the country.

Some consider this a cause for celebration. "Long queues at restaurants or theatre box-offices are seen as signs of success," says Brian Taylor, director of the Institute of Transportation Studies at UCLA. He thinks congestion "is an inevitable by-product of vibrant, successful cities". The examples of Paris, London and New York all show he has a point.

His view is not shared by most Californians. Surveys consistently show that two-thirds of the residents of Los Angeles County regard traffic congestion as "a big problem". By contrast, only two-fifths cite crime. The non-partisan Legislative Analyst's Office reckons that congestion—defined as freeway traffic moving at less than 35mph at peak commuting times—cost Californians some \$12.8m a day in time and fuel in 2002. It also added 530 tons of foul emissions to the air.

Hence the search for remedies—each of which comes with its own problems. More **public transport**? Some of America's train and subway systems have been successful, notably San Francisco's BART. But they cost a fortune. Chi-Hsin Shao, a traffic consultant in San Francisco, reckons even light-rail systems cost at least \$20m a mile, while going underground can cost more than \$200m a mile. The still-puny subway system of Los Angeles has cost \$4.5 billion, or some \$258m a mile; the city's light-rail system has cost well over \$35m a mile.

Greens hope to get at least some of the long-distance passenger traffic out of cars. But the fiasco of the Acela high-speed train system between Washington, DC, and Boston is hardly likely to inspire confidence in a long-standing dream to build a 700-mile (1,100km) high-speed rail system from San Diego to San Francisco (a proposed \$9 billion bond issue is slated to go before the voters in November next year).

Big blockers

Ranked by annual delay per traveller, 2003

Very large cities	Hours
Los Angeles-Long Beach-Santa Ana, CA	93
San Francisco-Oakland, CA	72
Washington area, DC VA MD	69
Atlanta, GA	67
Houston, TX	63
Large cities	Hours
Riverside-San Bernardino, CA	55
Orlando, FL	55
San Jose, CA	53
San Diego, CA	52
Denver-Aurora, CO	51

Source: Texas Transportation Institute

Public transport works well when there is a central hub—like Manhattan. But the Californian sprawl is “multimodal”: it works on the basis that everybody can go everywhere. Go to the Inland Empire (the suburban sprawl covered by Riverside and San Bernardino counties), the fastest-growing bit of the state, and you find people commuting to Los Angeles, to Orange County, to Pasadena, to Ventura or to any of the burgeoning edge cities within the Inland Empire itself. In 2000, 68% of Californians drove to work by themselves, but the figure rose to 77% for the new neighbourhoods, where half the new houses were built in the 1990s. When the commute gets too long—40 minutes is supposedly the cut-off point—people tend to move either their job or their home.

Driving alone explains why **car-pool lanes** have a limited appeal. High Occupancy Vehicle (HOV) lanes stretch for a mere 1,112 miles of California’s freeway system—and are often virtually empty. One idea is Mr Schwarzenegger’s decision, still awaiting federal approval, to let fuel-efficient hybrid cars use the HOV lanes whether they have passengers or not.

In the end, virtually all the solutions involve making drivers pay. More realistic fuel prices would make a difference: a gallon of petrol costs around \$2.50 in California, compared with \$5.90 in Britain. There are some subsidies for greener fuels, but there is no enthusiasm for a carbon tax, even though petrol taxes produce in real terms about one third of the revenue per vehicle mile that they did in 1970.

Road-pricing has been a little more successful. California has a few straightforward **toll roads**, such as state route 73, north of San Diego. But most tax-paying drivers fiercely oppose them. An alternative is the **toll lane**. High Occupancy Toll (HOT) lanes, such as those on state route 91 in Orange County, allow single drivers to drive on them for an extra fee—with the toll collected electronically and varying according to the level of congestion.

Early criticism of SR-91 was that a HOT lane amounted to a “Lexus lane”, favouring the wealthy solo mogul over the blue-collar pick-up-truck driver. In practice, it has worked out more democratically. Mr Taylor says 250,000 drivers have bought the transponders needed for the electronic billing system, and they use them—rich and poor alike—when speed is important.

The paradox, say the sceptics, is that HOT-lanes, like HOV-lanes, may actually increase car use: by freeing up extra capacity on the freeways, they allow more cars to use them. Nonetheless, simply to get at least some people from A to B quickly, it would surely be sensible to make more HOT-lanes available.

Another scheme being mooted in San Francisco is to imitate London and impose a **congestion charge** on drivers who enter the central area of the city. Jake McGoldrick, chairman of the San Francisco County Transportation Authority, calls this “a home run”: it would relieve congestion, lessen pollution and provide money for public transport. Unfortunately, there are relatively few other American cities with the public transport systems in place to follow the London example—and voter opposition would be a near-certainty.

Just stop that

In some cases, fighting congestion does not mean Californians coming up with ingenious ways to prevent it, so much as stopping doing things that encourage it. Donald Shoup and Michael Manville, colleagues of Mr Taylor at UCLA, point to the way that Los Angeles requires both office and residential buildings to provide parking spaces for their tenants. Whereas New York and San Francisco have strict limits on parking in their central business districts, Los Angeles “pursues a diametrically opposing path”.

Thus, the Louise Davis Hall, home to the San Francisco symphony orchestra, was built without a parking garage: when concerts end, the audience streams out into local bars and restaurants. By contrast, LA’s Disney Hall has a six-level, 2,188-space underground garage that cost a hefty \$110m. Disney Hall now has to guarantee at least 128 concerts each winter in order to generate enough parking revenue to service the garage’s debt. And, when concerts end, the audience drives away, leaving LA’s moribund downtown virtually untouched by their presence.

This reflects land-use laws. Under the current rules, for every single job in the central business district of Los Angeles there is 0.52 of a parking space; in San Francisco, there is 0.14 of a parking space for each job; in New York, just 0.06. Last week, a \$1.8 billion project to revitalise LA’s downtown area around Grand Avenue was unveiled: it envisages offices, a 275-room hotel, up to 2,600 housing units—and as many as 5,500 new parking spaces. Land-use policies help explain why San Francisco County’s 2m licensed drivers have a mere 382,000 cars between them, while LA County’s 5.9m drivers have 5.9m.

All true. But the main reason why both Disney Hall and the new Grand Avenue developments have huge parking spaces is simple: nobody would go there if they didn’t. California is a car culture—as is most of suburban America. Congestion is the inevitable result. Politicians could reduce that congestion by charging motorists more

for the petrol they guzzle and the roads they use. But it will only be a change at the margin. Californians have the traffic they deserve.
