

State must spend smarter on roads and ‘fix it first’

By Ethan N. Elkind Special to The Bee

Potholed roads, crumbling bridges, crowded buses and trains, collisions between cars and bicyclists. In short, California’s transportation infrastructure is in dire need of improvement.

Every year, the state, regional agencies and local governments spend about \$28 billion. But are we spending that money effectively?

Too often, decision-makers would rather fund new road and highway projects instead of improving our existing infrastructure and providing more affordable and convenient transportation options. Local political considerations seem to drive these decisions, instead of the most effective use of these funds. And to make matters worse, decision-making is highly decentralized and therefore uncoordinated. Money comes from federal, state and local sources, with multiple levels of government controlling the spending.

Yet these transportation decisions affect our lives as directly as anything our government does. They help determine the layout of our towns and cities, the location of our jobs and shops, and how painlessly we can get where we need to go. The decisions by an agency in a neighboring jurisdiction can mean the difference between an easy commute and a nightmare.

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At the same time, poor transportation decisions undercut vital state efforts to boost our economy and environment. The state is trying to encourage walkable neighborhoods and attempting to manage increasing traffic congestion, while also reducing air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions baking our planet.

[California should be much smarter about how we spend transportation dollars](#). As a start, policymakers should:

- Establish performance standards for new transportation projects to ensure that they are cost-effective, reduce driving miles, decrease air pollution and provide more transportation options.
- Reform the decision-making process by developing a common transportation vision for state agencies, along with incentives for local and regional agencies to help implement it.
- Direct a far greater percentage of money to repair and maintain existing infrastructure (“fix it first”), including making roadways safe and accessible for those who take transit, walk and bike.

Even with these reforms, a growing population will require more investment in smart new projects. Promising options to increase revenue include reducing the voter threshold from two-thirds to 55 percent to pass local funding measures for cost-



effective projects that reduce driving miles and air pollution. Another idea is to replace the gas tax with a user fee on the amount of actual miles driven. Better traffic management on existing roads and highways through congestion pricing would produce revenue that can be reinvested.

With these policies, California could start building the convenient, modern and accessible transportation system necessary for a dynamic economy and a better quality of life. But unless we start now, we'll be in for a long and bumpy ride.

Ethan N. Elkind is associate director of the Climate Change and Business Program at the UC Berkeley and UCLA Schools of Law. He will be speaking Saturday at the Planning and Conservation League's annual meeting at UC Davis.