

Opinion: Will California use congestion to coerce motorists?

By Dan Walters

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When Jerry Brown staged a symbolic “groundbreaking” for his pet bullet train project in downtown Fresno five months ago, he traveled to his event by car.

He wasn’t alone. The 350 miles or so he traveled on his round-trip that day were a minute fraction of the approximately 900 million miles that California motorists drive on streets, roads and highways each day.

Or to put it another way, autos account for well over 90 percent of Californians’ transportation. Even the most optimistic projections of non-automotive travel say that’s unlikely to change much in the future as the state’s population and transportation demands continue to grow.

That fact and years of political neglect generate two problems – the nation’s worst traffic congestion and its third-worst pavement conditions.

Brown says he wants to do something about the state’s deteriorating roadways and has called a special legislative session to explore ways to put billions of dollars more into maintenance and reconstruction.

However, he is silent on congestion. The special legislative session may bring a simmering dispute over that facet of the transportation conundrum into sharper focus.

Three months ago, Brown’s Department of Transportation, fulfilling a 2009 legislative mandate, began circulating a draft of a California Transportation Plan, aimed at setting policy for the next quarter-century.

Citing California’s commitments to reducing greenhouse gases and improving access to non-automotive transportation, the CTP proposes to reduce automotive travel by increasing motorists’ taxes, flatly rejecting “road capacity enhancing strategies,” and urging the state to “avoid funding projects that add road capacity.”

Implicitly, therefore, it contends that increasing traffic congestion and the cost of driving would compel Californians to abandon their cars in favor of transit, bicycles and other non-automotive modes.

A punitive approach doesn’t sit well with the California Transportation Commission.

This month, the commission declared the CTP “is planning for significant actions that will fundamentally alter how Californians will utilize our transportation system” and urged that it balance “environmental goals with economic and mobility needs.”

The CTP, the commission says, puts too much emphasis on reducing automotive travel and too little on technological advances, such as electric cars, that could reduce fossil fuel use – Brown’s goal is a 50 percent cut – while maintaining personal mobility.

Californians support greenhouse gas reduction. But do they also want the state to compel them to change their lifestyles by parking their cars, jumping aboard trolley cars and bicycles, and trading their single-family homes for denser housing, as the CTP and other state policies assume they must?

It would be interesting to put that question on the ballot.