



Wasting Time Wisely

Commuters delay entering the traffic fray

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Quitting time is decision time for Chris Salina, a radiology technician at Placentia-Linda Hospital in Orange County.

Home is nearly 50 miles away in southwestern Riverside County, but Salina instead focuses on after-work activities closer to his job: a trip to a nearby driving range to hit a bucket of golf balls, a little shopping at the nearby Brea Mall or maybe a workout at the gym.

"Sometimes I just go in there and stretch to relax after the day," Salina said. "I'll take a nice long shower and then go home."

With Highway 91 at a standstill at 5 p.m., Salina typically spends 90 minutes a day killing time until traffic on one of the nation's most-congested freeways starts to mellow.

With a wife and four kids in Canyon Lake, Salina hardly has time to indulge in solitary pursuits. But, he said, getting on the freeway at 5 p.m. would not get him home much faster.

"I think about that all the time," Salina said. "It (traffic) sort of forces you to do things you don't really want to do."



Traffic does more than just raise the blood pressure of commuters who fight their way through gridlock every day. It also pushes some to search for ways to delay the inevitable drive home, even though that costs them time that could be spent with family, helping with a child's homework or getting involved in their communities.

Driving on Highway 91 between Highway 55 and

GRIDLOCK GRIND

93 HOURS

The amount of time per year most people spend stuck in traffic in Los Angeles and Orange counties during peak periods, worst in the nation.

55 HOURS

The amount of time per year stuck in traffic in Riverside and San Bernardino counties during peak periods, ninth worst in the nation.

624 MILLION

The amount of hours travel is delayed each year in Los Angeles and Orange counties due to traffic, worst in the nation.

50.2 million

The amount of hours travel is delayed each

Interstate 15 at peak hours -- typically 5 to 7 p.m. on weeknights -- takes about an hour and 40 minutes, according to the Orange County Transportation Authority. Congestion costs drivers across the country about 3.7 billion hours in travel delays each year, according to a study from the Texas Transportation Institute at Texas A&M University.

Rigid schedules and work locations far from public transportation make it impossible for these commuters to dump their cars and take the Metrolink commuter rail system, hop on the bus or join a vanpool. Instead, they may either spend more time at work or take money they would spend on toll-road fees and while away a couple of hours in a coffeehouse.

Many commuters say it bothers them that they are missing valuable time with loved ones. But the daily grind of driving congested freeways would make them poor company right after work anyway, they said.

"When I get home, I don't want to talk to anyone for 20 minutes or more," said Maggie Grip, a Corona resident who works as a branch-operations officer at a bank in Newport Beach. "Sometimes I just jump in the shower right away to stay away from everybody."

Grip said she often is a "basket case" when she drives straight home from work at 5:30 p.m. via Highway 55 north and Highway 91 east. The drive usually takes at least two hours. Of her husband and grown son, she said: "They know by the look on my face whether they should stay away from me or not."

Grip has endured that drive for about a decade, but about two years ago, she tried something different. Now, most nights, she leaves work and drives about a mile to a friend's workplace, a law office in Irvine. The two usually chat for more than 90 minutes while her friend does filing.

"I unwind there, usually by complaining about my day," she said. "I just sit there with her until about quarter after seven."

Getting on the freeway right after work gets Grip home by about 7:45 p.m. Just the portion of the drive on Highway 55 between interstates 405 and 5, which is about seven miles, takes 45 minutes, she said. Delaying her departure means she gets home only a few minutes later than if she had left right after her shift ended.



A Drain on Area Taxes

Waiting to join the traffic flow might ease the nerves of harried drivers, but it can have a bad effect on sales-tax revenues that flow to Riverside and San Bernardino counties. Local governments receive sales tax from the state based on where goods are bought, not where the buyer lives.

Money spent in other counties means that sales taxes on those goods and services stay there, robbing local governments of revenue that could be used on Inland roads and other needs. A round of holiday shopping after work in Irvine kicks money into the coffers of Orange County that could be used for road and other improvements in the Inland area.

Many of the people who are shopping in centers along major transportation corridors such as Highway 91 or Interstate 10 in the late afternoon are frustrated commuters, said Scott Bernstein, president of the Center for Neighborhood Technology, a Chicago-based think tank that works with cities to create jobs with as little

year in Riverside and San Bernardino counties, 20th worst in the nation.

SOURCE: Texas Transportation Institute, sigalert.com

impact as possible on the environment.

"Those are prime shopping hours for those places, and that is happening all over America," said Bernstein, who tracks such trends. He co-wrote a report that documented how commuting and other transportation costs suck money out of family budgets and communities.

"Sprawl is not just a land-use problem; it's a fiscal problem," he said. "Your tax base is running away every day."

Toll Fees Add Up

The 91 Express Lanes offer some respite from the congested Highway 91, but several commuters to Orange County said that is not an option for them. The 10-mile toll road in the center median of Highway 91 can cut in half the time spent commuting between Orange and Riverside counties, but some say they cannot afford to spend more than \$1,000 per year on the toll roads.

Others, like Salina, object on principle to paying for the faster trip home on the freeway. He said he has mostly avoided the lanes since the top price for a 10-mile trip reached \$8.50 one way.

"I use it only in extreme cases, like when I absolutely have to be home at a certain time," Salina said. "The \$8.50 mark, that was my breaking point."

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Survey

What do you do to avoid getting stuck in rush hour traffic? [Comment](#)

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