

Does L.A. need own traffic formula?

Councilwoman can't understand why developments create more traffic than predicted in the reports used to get city approval.

By Kerry Cavanaugh
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Suspicious that new residential and commercial projects in Los Angeles are creating more traffic than developers and city planners had predicted, a councilwoman wants the city to set new traffic calculations that will generate more money to help fix congestion.

The Department of Transportation currently uses national averages to estimate traffic from proposed projects. Developers then must make improvements themselves, adding traffic signals and turn lanes, or cut a check to cover the cost of mitigation, including public transit or freeway ramps.

But in car-crazy L.A., new supermarkets, big-box stores and high-rise condo projects could create more vehicle trips than similar projects in Miami or Phoenix, Councilwoman Wendy Greuel said.

"We must acknowledge that increased density increases congestion," said Greuel, who plans to introduce a motion today asking the DOT to study whether L.A. needs its own formulas for estimating traffic from new projects.

"Traffic improvements are not cheap. It's really about money and how to make sure we have the resources to mitigate problems."

Traffic is one of the major reasons why residents of most cities oppose new development. Any new project adds cars to already clogged streets, and residents in Los Angeles have argued that many developers get away with only modest transportation improvements.

"Clearly what they do isn't working. That's why we're sitting in traffic. The process is flawed," said Ellen Vukovich of the Sherman Oaks Homeowners Association, who has clashed with the DOT over traffic projections from proposed projects.

"You have no way of knowing how the developer, how the city or how the traffic experts do these counts."

Planning General Manager Gail Goldberg hopes new, more accurate traffic projections will help give the planning process more credibility and address concerns that development is overburdening neighborhoods.

"We have a suspicion that the number of trips generated in this city may be higher than the national average," Goldberg said. "We may be doing an inadequate amount of mitigation."

In San Diego, where Goldberg served as planning director before coming to L.A., the city assumes a new shopping center will generate 70 to 100 vehicle trips per 1,000 square feet. The national averages L.A. uses predict about 43 vehicle trips per 1,000 square feet.

DOT General Manager Gloria Jeff said her staff could create a model capable of estimating the traffic impacts from projects in places as diverse as San Pedro and Westchester.

But that could cost several million dollars to model, and Jeff couldn't promise L.A. projections would be that different.

"We don't know if by having L.A.-unique numbers that these will be any more accurate or significant than the numbers we've been using," she said.

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