SOLUTIONS TO WESTSIDE GRIDLOCK


These are the first two of a series of articles on traffic and transportation in Los Angeles, and especially the Westside where I live and in which I suffer the utter waste of precious time sitting in gridlock on so many days. I believe that much of what you read here, you will not have seen in other places; at least I know I haven’t.

WHY DO YOU SPEND SO MUCH TIME TRAPPED IN WESTSIDE GRIDLOCK?

Chapter I

By Harold L. Katz

NIMBYs IMPACT ON TRAFFIC AND TRANSPORTATION

This is the first in a series of articles that will deal with traffic and public transportation. I regret that during the course of these articles I will irritate some of our readers. The fact is that traffic on the Westside is a nightmare that is only going to get worse. The people on the Westside must learn the hard cold facts and make their decisions based on those cold facts. To date I have never seen the cold hard facts in writing, they are not politically correct things to say. This is the first column dealing with cold facts, the impact of NIMBYs on traffic and transportation. The NIMBYs will show up throughout the series and you will not only see why, you will understand why. Let me clarify that there is a big difference between citizen input to the development process and traffic and transportation planning and NIMBYism, I’m all for citizen participation. Some 30 years ago I wrote a series on the same subject over a two year period. You will find that very little has changed, in fact many of my new articles will contain abstracts from those 30 year old columns.

After 35 years of citizen activism I can say that the traffic and transportation problems we face in this city, at least on the Westside, and the failure of developers to build many fine projects in this city are specifically related to the fact that too many NIMBYs don’t want anything that is financially viable to be built. I will offer several short examples:

1. A developer was planning to build a four star hotel in Westwood. He worked on it for four years or more. When I read the NIMBYs proposals to the city, there were two that stood out in my mind that I will never forget. One side of the hotel faced a semi residential street. These NIMBYs insisted that there be no bars on that side of the hotel. At first I thought, okay the developer can live with that. Then I read the details, the bars they were referring to were the mini-bars that are found inside the hotel room. I couldn’t believe my eyes. Then I read on and the next thing that has stood with me for all these years was there insistence that people who were to dine at the fine restaurant, in this four star hotel, were not to be allowed to take their uneaten food home with them for fear that these people would throw the food out on the lawns of the neighbors as they either walked home (note they too were neighbors) or walked to their cars (how many of these people would not park in the valet parking at the hotel). You cannot tell me that these NIMBYs were reasonable or that their ideas should be given serious consideration. However, after spending close to a million dollars, the developer walked away.
2. A fine family of developers, a father and son, were going to build a strip shopping mall. There
planes were all approved and they were ready to begin construction when the city came to them
and asked them to add another level of parking which the city would pay for and which would
be used for employees working in stores along the street to park their cars, thereby freeing up
the parking meters. The father and son said certainly, they would be happy to accommodate
the city’s request. The NIMBYs jumped on this change and said this was a new project and it
had to go through the permitting procedure again. The result, I was told was that the family,
the nicest people you would want to meet, went bankrupt (no good deed goes unpunished),
someone else bought the property and the project was built.

3. Another example was the 20th Century Fox Project. There were 400+ NIMBYs and 5,000+
Friends of Fox. But who wielded the power, the 400+ NIMBYs. I remember challenging
Councilman Yaroslavsky, who I consider a friend, at a public hearing when he insisted that Fox
cut two floors off an office building within the lot site itself. I think they asked for 7 floors and
he offered them 5. I told him that if they had asked for 9 he would have offered them 7, had
they asked for 11 he would have offered them 9, all because the NIMBYs had to be fed
politically. That is not the way to run a city.

4. Finally, there is Santa Monica Blvd. between the Beverly Hills City Limits and the 405
Freeway, a little over two miles. The professionals suggested there be five lanes in each
direction, which I agreed with. I also asked that one lane be reserved for busses and carpools,
which was long before there were carpool lanes planned for the 405, but I like to think ahead.
The NIMBYs screamed, and I mean literally screamed that five lanes in each direction would
be a freeway. So, adding in the cost of buying the railroad right of way, we will have spent
over $100 million, we will have started with three lanes in each direction and we will ended with
three lanes in each direction (the LA Times is wrong when they keep saying it will be four
lanes, I drove it today). One of the last opportunities to increase East/West capacity and the
NIMBYs won again. By the way Supervisor Yaroslavsky was quoted as having stated the
NIMBYs could not dictate Los Angeles transportation plans and then he announced the
approval of the three lanes in each direction, just what the NIMBYs wanted, well actually they
would have liked two but they knew they couldn’t get that.

5. Oh yes then there is the Exposition line, where there is a right of way from USC to the Ocean.
But NO, a handful of NIMBYs in Cheviot Hills do not want the trains to run near their homes
(who can blame them, except the tracks were there when they bought their homes). Result,
the train will go from USC to Robertson and stop. Then the city will have to acquire the right of
way to V it down to Venice and then back up to Exposition on the other side of Cheviot Hills.

So if the city officials really believe that they must continue with their plans to accommodate the
NIMBYs, in 35 years we will have a mess that is 20 times as bad as what we have now. There is a
solution, a difficult one, and to date impossible to implement, get the attention of the homeowners the
NIMBYs claim to represent, and make a fair and balanced presentation to them. I believe they would
not support the NIMBY leadership, for the very people the NIMBYs claim to be protecting are the
people who are hurt the most. Ask the residents of Cheviot Hills and the impact on their life of traffic
calming installations. The problem is the mass of the community will not come out to hear a fair and
balanced presentation. So has it been, and so it is that we have mass gridlock and its going to get worse as we have implemented most of the tweaks that can be implemented. There is nothing left to tweak.

(Harold L. Katz is an active CPA with offices in Brentwood, but as he says, his heart is in Century City where he moved to in 1965 and stayed almost 25 years. He has recently activated his membership in the Century City of Chamber and is a member of the Board of Directors.)

**WHY DO YOU SPEND SO MUCH TIME TRAPPED IN WESTSIDE GRIDLOCK?**

**Chapter II**

**By Harold L. Katz**

**UNDENIABLE TRUTHS AND A COUPLE OF OPINIONS**

1) First truth, when ever government acts some people are adversely impacted and some people benefit. That applies to almost all acts by both elected officials (EO) and governmental bureaucrats (GB). Raising taxes is a perfect example, those that have to pay are adversely impacted and those who benefit from the expenditure of the new tax funds benefit. Another example is the construction or enlargements of freeways and carpool lanes. Some benefit and some are adversely impacted.

a) The first commandment of every EO and GB should be that the greatest number of the public should benefit and least number should be adversely impacted.

b) My considerable experience has been that this commandment is many times made but mostly ignored. Two quick examples:

i) The state is looking at the parking lot known as the Ventura Freeway. They concluded that they wanted to STUDY the possibility of adding two lanes in each direction. In order to just study this alternative, it had to be included in plan for future study, so the study could be funded. This was not a plan to build it, it was a plan to consider and study a concept.

Immediately the NIMBYs attacked in full force, led by someone the LA Times named the Silver bullet, a NIMBY of long standing. The state backed off under the pressure from elected officials who in turn crumbled under the pressure of NIMBYism. Under the plan that was to be studied 1,000 homes and businesses would have to be taken, indeed a substantial number. However the freeway serves over 2 1/2 million people. Most of the 1,000 properties taken would have been adequately compensated and their places of business or residences would have been replaced.

ii) The second example is the Exposition light rail line which was to be built from downtown to the Ocean. Instead because of a few home owners, it is stopping at Robertson.

I have tried to get this line printed in several newspapers and it has been edited out, but it is a truth: When the NIMBYs howl elected officials wet their pants. I know that this line will upset...
most elected officials, but a fact is a fact. NIMBYs have a disproportionate amount of power over elected officials and the media.

2. The second truth is that the Westside was not designed to accommodate UCLA, Westwood, Century City or the commercial development in Santa Monica and Beverly Hills, especially as to North South streets. Century City was developed based on the then planned Beverly Hills Freeway and the dreamed of subway system, this was in the late fifties early sixties. I moved into Century City in the sixties, created the Century City Chamber of Commerce with the help of an Alcoa subsidiary, Century City Inc., so I was there and speak from first hand experience.

Having accepted this fact, we must now accept the fact that all these developments are here and all the wishing in the world is not going to make them go away. Their existence has to be dealt with, as is the development yet to come (which will be the subject of another Chapter). Why there is no Beverly Hills Freeway or a subway station are subject for one or two separate columns.

3. The third truth is the relationship of the San Fernando Valley to the Westside. It used to be that traffic flowed in one direction, from the Valley to the Westside in the morning and vice versa in the evening. Now heavy traffic flows in each direction. As for the Westside, there are only a limited number of routes from the Valley to the business centers on the Westside. They are Coldwater Canyon, Benedict Canyon and Beverly Glen sharing one street on the Valley side, Roscomare Road on the Westside only, Sepulveda and the 405 parking lot. That is an incredibly limited road capacity to handle the tens of thousands, if not 100,000+ cars that make the trip. Coldwater and Benedict serve primarily Beverly Hills so I will not cover them in this column.

Instead I want to deal with Beverly Glen only. About 15 years ago I attended an annual meeting of the Holmby Westwood Homeowners Assn. Prior to the official commencement of the meeting a group of homeowners who lived on Beverly Glen South of Sunset were passing a petition around to downgrade the classification of Beverly Glen and to reduce the traffic capacity. Responding to request of neighbors, almost everyone signed the petition, without focusing on the ramification of the petition. This was another example of NIMBYism having an impact on the traffic flow on the entire Westside and the Valley. I don’t blame the people who sponsored the petition, but I do question the actions of the people who signed the petition without stopping to think of the ramifications of their actions. This kind of thinking is one of the reasons you can’t get there from here on the Westside.

4 Let’s deal with another truth, traffic capacity from Wilshire Blvd. South. There is very little. We have Motor going south from Pico, Overland, Westwood, Veteran, Sepulveda and the 405 parking lot. 30 years ago I suggested to the City of LA that they take the houses on one of either side of Overland and widen the street. I thought they were going to tar and feather me and run me out of town, and some of you I’m sure wish they had. But here I applied rule 1 a) above.

As for the people who live on Motor, and who have lived there from before the late fifties and the announcement of Century City, you have my empathy. For those that moved in afterwards, you knew what was coming, as I did when I bought a house on Lindbrook backing off of Wilshire and those that buy houses facing the Getty and the 405. In the latter two cases we got noise and in the case of Motor you got traffic. We have to move a lot of cars North and South and we have a few narrow streets to do it on. Fact, when you install traffic mitigation tools, you may move some of the cars off your street, but you just move it to someone else’s street. The one thing you do not do is eliminate any cars. The other thing you do is slow traffic down throughout the area impacted by the mitigation procedures.

The following is not a fact it is an opinion, traffic mitigation procedures on the Westside are a disaster, more problems are created than are solved and many residences in the immediate areas of the mitigation, i.e. Motor...
On Saturday 9/16/05 the LA Times had a marvelous editorial entitled “Westside's second chance.” It fits in perfectly with this series on why you spend so much time trapped in Gridlock. Regrettably it was printed on a Saturday instead of a Sunday. It should have been printed on the front page of the paper. So many truths so rarely found in a newspaper of the LA Times stature.

The first truth is that “it’s not going to get better; in fact with the number of big developments in the pipeline it’s going to get a good deal worse.”

They then went on to mention the second truth, which I covered in Chapter 1, and which they got partially right. They said ‘There is a solution, if the not in my backyard forces (NIMBYs) that have torpedoed major public transit projects in the past will wise up.” NIMBYs can be blamed for a lot of our problems but I don’t think the two major public transit projects we needed desperately were stopped by NIMBYs, but I do appreciate the LA Times picking up on my theory on NIMBYs in Chapter 1.

It is true that for over 30 years NIMBYs have opposed traffic and transportation improvements for fear it would lead to commercial development. What they missed is that the commercial development comes with or without the traffic and transportation improvements. Now we have the proposed development on the Veterans’ property, and the new FBI headquarters next to the federal building, which I would think everyone would welcome in this world of terrorism. Some of that property is going to be developed; the only question is how much. Meanwhile our elected officials wring their hands and say whoa is me, what to do, what to do. Well they should have done things 30 years ago in anticipation of what was coming and they should be doing things now in anticipation of what is coming during the next 30 years. I would suggest a totally new concept, “THINK AHEAD.”

The Times went on to say “Century City is under going heavy redevelopment. One day I’ll tell you why a beautiful building, with a fine legitimate theater and one of the most comfortable movie complexes in LA was torn down after only 27 years. As I told a predominately Russian audience at the closing night of Russian Roulette Supper Club, only in America do we tear down perfectly good, well almost perfectly good 27 year old buildings.

They went on to say “the good citizens of Westwood are rethinking the wisdom of having their congressman prevent subway construction down Wilshire Blvd. in the 1980s and then Zev Yaroslavsky proposed and the voters passed a proposition that forbid the use of a half cent sales tax for subway projects. In my opinion both were off the wall decisions that did irreparable damage (you can’t get those years back) to the Westside.

The Times goes on to say “There is no corridor in Los Angels where a subway arm makes mores sense than Wilshire Boulevard all the way from downtown to Westwood and beyond.” They made only one mistake; they should have said West of Manhattan instead of in Los Angeles.

With all due respect to our new mayor and with the hope that this was a misprint, the Times said that Mayor Villaraigosa would have a study in four years on the question of the safety of drilling along Wilshire Blvd. I suggest that Congressman Waxman dust off the report prepared by his hand selected special committee of
experts who conducted such a study and concluded that it was perfectly safe to build a subway straight down Wilshire, in fact they said it was more dangerous to direct the line South through a different type of gas pocket. Congressman Waxman can begin the ball rolling now to reverse his original law. Of course with Katrina I expect a great deal of the transportation money voted by Congress to disappear for a long time.

I do tip my hat to the editorial writer who also said “a victim of shortsighted politicians and NIMBY Westside residents.” How true, how true.

One can’t talk about this subject without mentioning the Beverly Hills Freeway, which was defeated due to the efforts of certain Beverly Hill powers and then state Senator Anthony Beilenson who said the answer was not another freeway, but rather that people on the Westside ride bicycles. Need I say more? I have not so fond memories of Senator Beilenson who attended what was to be the final meeting on the Santa Monica Plan in October 1974. There had been dozens if not hundreds of meetings, negotiations and compromises made over a two year period to come up with a final plan and Senator Beilenson insisted that SCAG perform a new study of route 2, widening the area to Sunset on the North and Pico on the South. To the best of my memory that study was never done, but Santa Monica Blvd.’s improvements were put off for 30 years, and people on the Westside still don’t ride bicycles. For one of the few times in my life, I lost my composure, I could not believe that he was undoing all that I and so many had worked so hard to put together. I was actually screaming NO! NO! NO! but the game was lost. Three days later I was in Century City Hospital having suffered a heart attack.

I’m always incredulous when people are surprised about the development in Century City. City Planner Calving Hamilton many years ago laid out his idea for the development of Los Angeles, it was called the Centers Concept and Century City was one of those centers. Also, if one would only look at the original model of Century City prepared by Alcoa Industries so many years ago, one would see that the final development is smaller than that which was originally planned. So why the big surprise now that it has been built?

In closing, remember my first rule of all governmental action, the greatest number of the public should benefit and the least number should be adversely impacted. For 30 years it has been just the other way around.

P.S. to the Los Angeles Times. Who or what is the single greatest source of power of the NIMBYs you now complain about is, let’s see who or what could that be; oh yes THE LOS ANGELS TIMES. It is your reporters who quote and thereby empower these people. In the almost 20 years I was chairman of the Transportation and Planning Committee of the Los Angeles Business Council not one of your reporters, other than Gerald Farris, ever called me for my take on a situation, though you did print my letters to the editors, which is a far cry from page one of the Metro Section. So when you’re stuck in gridlock, pull down the sun shade, open the mirror and look at one of the people who is responsible for your irritating situation.

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