It's official! 405 is nation's worst: Route into Valley is most congested in the U.S.

By Dakota Smith, Staff Writer LA Daily News

Commuters stuck on the San Diego (405) Freeway have long felt they're sitting in some of the worst traffic in the country.

Now another study confirms it.

A survey of the nation's busiest corridors ranked the northbound 405 Freeway, from the Imperial Highway (105) to the Getty Center exit, as the most clogged route in the country.

And it's not just that section of the 405 that's slow. The traffic study by INRIX Inc., a Kirkland, Wash.-based company, found six sections of the 405 ranked among the 162 most congested corridors in the country.

The results were no surprise to Metropolitan Transportation Authority officials, who've long watched traffic patterns across this region, particularly the stretch of the 405 near the Ventura (101) Freeway.

"Because of the topography, because of the mountain range, it's one of the most congested corridors," said Doug Failing, executive director of Metro's highway program.

"That part will never change."

But a dramatic proposal to ease traffic is in the works. By the end of the summer, Metro will release a study outlining mass transit options for the area.

The study will consider options such as a rail line under the Santa Monica Mountains or light rail above the freeway.

Another idea is a rapid bus-only lane on the corridor, similar to the project planned for Wilshire Boulevard.

Until the study is completed, Metro officials are keeping mum on the details of what mass transit proposal they'll back. The project would be funded with $1 billion from Measure R, the half-percent sales tax increase approved by county voters in 2008.

One vocal proponent of a mass transit plan over the Pass is The Transit Coalition, a San Fernando-based transportation advocacy and land use planning nonprofit group.

The coalition has studied building a light rail line under the Santa Monica Mountains, and their proposal has the support of numerous Valley neighborhood council groups, executive director Bart Reed said.

The line would travel above ground on Van Nuys Boulevard, go underground at the Orange Line busway stop and then continue underground through the Sepulveda Pass before coming out at Sepulveda and Pico boulevards.

"Commuters could go from Ventura Boulevard to Wilshire Boulevard in just six minutes," Reed said.
The Transit Coalition hasn't met formally with Metro officials to share the idea, but Reed said his group will pay attention when the Metro study is released at the end of summer.

Until that happens, commuters heading over the mountains have little choice but to take the car or a bus.

To help explain why traffic is so bad, Metro's Failing said just look out the window. The steep inclines and declines of the Sepulveda Pass actually contribute to gridlock.

As cars climb the hills, they slow down, creating a wave of congestion. On the decline, the automobiles speed up and make up for some of the lost time, but not enough.

Additionally, the 405 Freeway is the main north-south artery for nearly everyone in the region.

"All the traffic in the San Fernando Valley and all the traffic on the Westside has to come into this little funnel," Failing said.

To date, Metro's most ambitious plan to tackle traffic in the area has been the 405 widening project, which will add a car-pool lane to the northbound side of the freeway between the 101 and the 10 freeways when completed next year.

Reaction to the construction has been mixed by both transit advocates and neighborhood leaders.

Damien Newton, editor of Streetsblog L.A., a blog covering transportation issues, questions the wisdom of spending $1 billion to widen the roadways given that studies show traffic congestion eventually returns.

"Adding more highway capacity without adding transit options is just going to add more people," Newton said.

Metro officials have defended the car-pool lane as one of many fixes to the area, including the Sepulveda Pass project.

But Newton, who lives in West L.A. and fights 405 traffic when he visits relatives in Woodland Hills, is more interested in seeing what Metro proposes this fall.

"Some sort of heavy rail, subway or above-ground rail, or even a bus lane would really open up the city," he said. "It's kind of exciting to think about." dakota.smith@dailynews.com
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