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Putting brakes on bus-only lane?

A councilman wants to suspend the mile-long stretch along Wilshire Boulevard because it is adding to gridlock.

By Jean Guccione
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Businessman Jay Handal blames the bus-only lanes for making traffic "miserably worse" along Wilshire Boulevard.

Why, he grouses, should motorists driving the nearly one-mile stretch of Wilshire have to wait longer so buses can zoom past them in dedicated traffic lanes?

Because, transit officials counter, those few frustrating minutes could eventually show the way to reducing the number of cars on one of the nation's most congested corridors. If buses move faster, they reason, some motorists might get out of their personal vehicles and onto public transit.

But now even that one-mile stretch of bus lane between Centinela and Barrington avenues is in jeopardy. And that, in turn, could put the brakes on a plan to extend the lane along the length of Wilshire.

Los Angeles City Councilman Bill Rosendahl, who represents the area, told colleagues last month that he wants to suspend use of the current bus-only lanes until the larger project gets underway.

"It has caused more gridlock than it has helped," he said, noting that his proposal is based on a city traffic engineer report.

Rosendahl pledged to reinstate the lane when other sections are opened. But Los Angeles County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky, who also represents the area, said that unless the existing lane remains open, "there is no reason for the whole project to go forward."

County transit officials propose building a 13-mile bus lane along Wilshire from Western Avenue to Santa Monica as part of its Metro Rapid bus program.

The first segment, the one-mile stretch on the Westside, was re-stripped and opened in 2004 as part of a six-month demonstration project that was made permanent.

Since then, the city of Los Angeles has eliminated two blocks of the demonstration project, between Federal and Barrington avenues, because of impeded traffic flow near the San Diego Freeway.

In the remaining 14 blocks, only buses and private vehicles making right turns can use the far right lane during peak periods — from 7 to 9 a.m. and 4 to 7 p.m. No other portion of the proposed lane has been built.

Transit officials estimate it would cost \$100 million to fix potholes, re-stripe the street and make other improvements as part of the larger project to give buses their own lane.

Rosendahl says he supports extending bus lanes through the cities of Los Angeles, Beverly Hills and Santa Monica. But for now, he adds, it is unfair to target only his constituents.

Merchants complain of lost street parking. Residents complain about increased traffic on surrounding streets, caused by motorists snaking through neighborhoods to avoid getting stuck on Wilshire.

Handal, who is president of the West Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, said transportation officials should look at the bigger picture.

Bus riders, on average, save just 40 seconds in the bus lane, hardly noticeable on an hour-long bus trip, especially when it comes at the expense of thousands of motorists sitting in traffic. But transit officials hasten to point out that when the entire project is finished, bus riders could save 20 minutes or more.

Even now, the 40 seconds bus riders save using the mile-long bus lane can increase during the worst rush-hour traffic to as long as 12 minutes. Transit officials have clocked buses taking just seven minutes to travel those 14 blocks, while cars might take as long as 19 minutes.

"If we can carry more people with fewer vehicles, we think we are doing a good thing," said David Mieger, director of Westside planning for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority.

City Councilwoman Wendy Greuel, who leads the council's Transportation Committee, said she supports extending the Wilshire bus-only lanes. She said she has asked staff for additional information on Rosendahl's proposal before it goes to the full council. A vote has not been scheduled. An identical proposal was withdrawn earlier this year.

"I want to make sure that nothing we do jeopardizes the future of a peak-hour bus-only lane," she said.

Rosendahl said he hopes his motion will nudge county transit officials to move faster to extend the lanes.

In recent months, the MTA has begun two Wilshire bus-lane extension projects. Nearly a mile of busway is being added eastbound on county-owned land in front of the West Los Angeles

Veterans Affairs Medical Center. And \$1.1 million has been dedicated to building bus-only lanes between San Vicente Boulevard and Fairfax Avenue.

"We need bus-only lanes," Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa said. "We've got to move more people from single-passenger automobiles to buses, to trains, to public transit."

Manuel Criollo, a spokesman for the Bus Riders Union, a transit advocacy group, envisions a time when buses speed past stopped vehicles on Wilshire, offering a much-needed incentive for motorists to take the bus.

"It's the best alternative that we can actually do right now," he said. "It helps the mobility of riders and it challenges the car."

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