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City takes a light approach in new battle to ease traffic bottlenecks

Improved signal timing and other measures help to improve the flow at intersections across L.A.

By Jean Guccione
Times Staff Writer

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Shoppers driving to The Grove might not notice the few seconds they save turning into the parking structure. But traffic signals on Beverly Boulevard eastbound at The Grove Drive have been tweaked to get them there a little quicker.

Traffic flow improved at the intersection, which has been identified as one of the city's most congested, with such small fixes as extending the amount of time the signal lights stay green.

Across the city, similar improvements were made at 33 intersections, saving commuters on average 22 seconds each.

Over a year, those seconds can add up to two hours for each improved crossing a motorist enters daily during the worst traffic.

"We all know that every second counts when you are stuck in traffic," Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa said Thursday at a news conference announcing the improvements.

Since January, the city Department of Transportation has identified 100 of the most clogged intersections as part of Operation Bottleneck, its traffic congestion relief initiative.

Rush-hour delays have been reduced up to 78% at a third of the worst cross-streets in Hollywood, the San Fernando Valley, Crenshaw and on the Westside.

Besides better signal timing, some intersections have had traffic officers assigned to them. Others have been re-striped or had dedicated turn lanes added.

"Taken all together, these improvements are saving Angelenos 670 hours per day, over 244,000 hours per year as they travel along our busiest corridors," Villaraigosa said.

Councilwoman Wendy Greuel, who is the chairwoman of the council's Transportation Committee, said the changes should improve quality of life.

"When you're driving down the street and you have to stop at every single light that is not synchronized, that can affect your daily commute," Greuel said.

Last week, city officials announced that 71 more traffic signals in the San Fernando Valley had been synchronized, shaving minutes off the drive on Van Nuys Boulevard and surrounding streets.

Villaraigosa and others hope that the state infrastructure bond issue, which was approved by voters Tuesday, will provide the \$150 million needed to synchronize all the city's 4,300 traffic signals. About 77% of the signals already have been timed.

Bond money also will go toward resurfacing miles of city streets and possibly overhauling more intersections.

Gloria Jeff, who heads the city Transportation Department, said that as many as 65 more clogged intersections needed additional work, such as widening streets and adding turn lanes.

As the mayor spoke about relieving traffic congestion in known hot spots, traffic engineers, sitting around him in the city's Automatic Traffic Surveillance and Control Center, were checking for unexpected vehicle backups elsewhere.

They scanned giant flat-screen monitors for streets temporarily blocked by construction, traffic collisions, signal malfunctions and other problems.

Eric Maya got a radio call from the San Fernando Valley, alerting him to cars backing up at Burbank and Reseda boulevards. The left turn signal on one of the streets was supposed to stay green for 45 seconds, he said. But it turned red after only 10 seconds.

From his chair, Maya adjusted the traffic signal, giving left-turning vehicles a few more seconds. Then, a closed-circuit camera at the intersection showed the clog dissipating.

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(INFOBOX BELOW)

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Spelling traffic relief

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Since January, the city's traffic congestion relieve initiative, known as Operation Bottleneck, has reduced rush-hour delays up to 78% at 33 of the city's most clogged intersections by

improving traffic light signaling and restriping streets.

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