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Easing air traffic at LAX is no easy task

Other Southland airports have little room for expansion. John Wayne in Santa Ana, for example, has a single runway for commercial traffic and is nearing its cap on the annual number of passengers because of community concerns over air traffic.

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"Regionalization." It's one of those government buzzwords you may have heard public officials utter -- their peculiar way of saying they want to diminish air traffic at Los Angeles International Airport and spread it out to other area airports.

Of course, there are a couple of problems with that goal.

The first, as reported in The Times last week, is that the Southern California Regional Airport Authority -- the agency resurrected by Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa to promote "regionalization" -- hasn't bothered to meet in six months.

And the other problem?

At this time, there isn't much room for growth at most other Southern California airports. San Diego, for example, has one runway and can't handle overseas traffic. John Wayne in Orange County, too, has a single, short runway for commercial traffic and is nearing its cap on the annual number of passengers because of community concerns over air traffic.

Long Beach is at the limit of large commercial planes it is allowed to handle, and Bob Hope in Burbank has an agreement with that city not to even try to expand its 12-gate terminal for the next several years.

The two airports that have room to grow are Ontario and Palmdale, both owned and operated by Los Angeles World Airports. Ontario's terminal can handle about 3 million more passengers per year, and officials want to add flights there. And Palmdale has tons of room, the problem being that it's in Palmdale.

More on that in a moment.

What are the current numbers of passengers who use each airport?

Here are the numbers of total passengers at each airport in 2006, followed by the number of people living within a 25-mile radius of the airport, as calculated by the computer mapping firm ESRI:

LAX: 61 million, 8.5 million

San Diego: 17.5 million, 2.3 million

John Wayne: 9.6 million, 5.2 million

Ontario: 7 million, 3.95 million

Burbank: 5.7 million, 7.74 million

Long Beach: 2.75 million, 9.7 million

Palmdale: 0, 388,000

Geographically attuned readers may note that LAX is bordered on one side by the ocean but still has the second-highest number of people living within a 25-mile radius. Besides having more runways, longer runways and more terminal space than the other airports, that may be one reason LAX is so busy.

Wait. So Orange County and San Diego County residents are basically glomming onto LAX for most of their international travel needs?

That's right. Cities in both counties in recent years had the chance to build new, large airports but voters declined to do so -- a de facto vote to keep LAX as their major airport.

Voters in San Diego last year told their local airport authority it should not even discuss obtaining land for a new airport from the Miramar Marine Corps Air Station. That echoed the 2002 vote in several Orange County cities to rezone the El Toro Marine air base land to ensure that it didn't become a commercial airport.

"That was right up there with the level of stupidity of selling the Red Car rights of way," said former L.A. Councilwoman Ruth Galanter, a regionalization proponent who has seen too many former streetcar routes paved over and lost for good.

What about Palmdale?

In the late 1960s, and even as it was greatly expanding LAX, the city of Los Angeles' airport department began buying more than 17,000 acres in Palmdale for a new airport.

Twenty years after the land was purchased, the airport still was leasing some of that land for sheepherding. Now, almost 40 years later, the airport has two daily flights to and from San Francisco, which began this year, but it still leases some land to a pistachio farm.

It doesn't take a genius to figure out the problem: The airport is 61 miles from downtown Los Angeles, a ridiculously far distance compared with other big city airports that have been built in what at one time was considered the sticks.

For example, Dulles International is 26 miles from downtown Washington, and Denver International is 23 miles from downtown Denver.

The other problem with Palmdale is there's only one way to get there, the 14 Freeway across the San Gabriel Mountains. There has been talk for decades of building a high-speed rail line between L.A. and the airport, but that talk is no different than a hot desert wind.

Why can't public officials just tell the airlines where they should fly?

The big reason is a 1990 federal law that limits how much cities can constrain flights at their airports because of noise concerns. The law's aim -- rightly or wrongly -- was to prevent cities across the nation from adopting a variety of noise laws that would restrict interstate commerce.

That means it's largely up to the airlines to pick and choose where they want to fly. As a result, they fly where they perceive the most market is for their services and to the airports where they've made investments in terminals and equipment.

In Southern California, that's usually LAX, and that means the bottom line is there really isn't much reason for anyone who lives near LAX to expect that air traffic will soon diminish.

Anything else to chew on?

The Bay Area and Las Vegas are the No. 1 and No. 4 destinations out of LAX, respectively. Neither one is that far from L.A., but the only options for getting there are driving or flying.

Contrast that to the East Coast, where there is excellent rail service. It's possible, for example, to travel roughly 240 miles from New York to Washington in 2 hours and 35 minutes on Amtrak.

There is no rail service to Las Vegas from L.A., and Amtrak service between L.A. and Oakland takes 11 to 12 hours, unless you take the bus-train option that shaves a couple of hours off the trip.

Folks, that's beyond slow or Third World. That's Stone Age.

Turning to other matters, what about those traffic lights in Pasadena?

A couple of weeks ago we noted that the lights seem to be reverse synchronized, that is, often one light will turn green just as the next one turns red.

At best, most traffic signals seem to act as independent variables.

But Bahman Janka, a transportation administrator in Pasadena, said that most lights are synchronized in the city and that the city wants very much to keep traffic moving.

That brought this response from Kathy Musial, who has lived on the Pasadena-Altadena border for 10 years and commutes through Pasadena each day: "The signals are synchronized to what -- the orbit of the moon?"

We also asked Janka about a weird phenomenon in Pasadena in which a motorist will be stopped by a red light on a major street, yet there will be no traffic or pedestrian at the cross street.

Janka said that some signals in Pasadena are triggered by mounted cameras rather than electronic doohickeys buried in the pavement. Those cameras sometimes trip a traffic signal after they are shaken by the wind or pick up a shadow from a passing animal. Seriously.

The weird part about all this is that traffic isn't bad in Pasadena; the lights are mostly an annoyance.

Besides, motorists who are tired of hitting red lights always have another option: There are plenty of quiet, leafy and pretty residential neighborhoods to cut through.

Next week: A non-public official's plan to fund a subway to the sea.

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