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Bay Area's long and grinding roads **Annual survey points out what most commuters** **already know: Traffic's bad and getting worse**

- Michael Cabanatuan, Chronicle Staff Writer
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Jaded commuters accustomed to the crawl along the Bay Area's backed-up freeways know all too well that some things, like traffic congestion, rarely change. And when they do, they only get worse.

The Bay Area's annual report card on the region's lousiest commutes, released Tuesday by Caltrans and the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, backs that up:

-- Traffic congestion on Bay Area freeways climbed 9 percent in 2005, the biggest increase since 2000. It was fueled, transportation officials say, by the creation of 26,000 jobs in the region in 2005.

-- For the sixth straight year, the morning ride from Hercules to the Bay Bridge on Interstate 80 ranks as the worst commute. Interstate 580 through eastern Alameda County ranks No. 2 (eastbound) and No. 3 (westbound).

"It's absolutely hideous. The I-80 congestion is enough to make me quit my job," Christy Shepard of Berkeley, a nurse who makes home visits in San Francisco, said as she prepared for the drive back across the bridge to the East Bay on Tuesday.

But in announcing the annual congestion data, transportation officials also emphasized that this year is different. Approval of the state infrastructure bond measure in November, they said, would pump \$18 billion into transportation improvements around the state and speed many long-awaited transportation projects.

"This transportation bond will put the state of California back on the road to prosperity again," said Scott Haggerty, an Alameda County supervisor and a transportation commission member. "This is the way to get California moving again, to get California working again."

With state and federal transportation funds scarce in recent years, transportation agencies have devoted the bulk of their funds to maintaining highways and transit systems.

"We are barely preserving the system we have," said Bijan Sartipi, Caltrans district director. "There is hardly enough money now to fund maintenance, much less improvements."

Most major transportation projects have been funded in large part by county transportation sales taxes combined with state and federal funds. But the massive infusion of cash from the bond measure would mean that many of those projects would be completed more quickly, Sartipi said.

Many of those improvements are planned for the 10 commuter chokepoints identified in the 2005 survey.

Following I-80 and I-580 on the list are Highway 101 northbound and I-80 eastbound in San Francisco in the evening; Highway 101 southbound through Marin County in the morning; Highway 4 in eastern Contra Costa County in the evening; Highway 4 westbound in the morning; Highway 101 through Marin southbound in the evening; and I-80 eastbound, between Yerba Buena Island and Emeryville, in the evening.

Sartipi said construction crews are widening Highway 4 in eastern Contra Costa and adding carpool lanes to Highway 101 through Marin. The Highway 92/I-880 interchange in Hayward is scheduled for replacement beginning next year, an eastbound carpool lane will be added to I-580 in the Tri-Valley area starting next year, and an extension of the I-80 carpool lane is planned from Hercules to the Carquinez Bridge.

"If the bond measure passes in November," he said, "there will be money available for more of these types of projects."

Backers of a fourth bore for the Caldecott Tunnel, for example, hope that the bond measure would raise the final \$100 million to \$150 million needed to start digging. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, while not making any promises, raised hopes by signing the legislation for the bond measure in front of the Contra Costa portals to the tunnel last month.

Other projects that could benefit from the bond measure are the westbound carpool lane on I-580, now scheduled to start construction in 2012; the Doyle Drive replacement in San Francisco; the Interstate 80, 680 and Highway 12 interchange at Cordelia; widening of Highway 12 in Jamison Canyon in Napa County; and the Highway 101 widening in Sonoma and Marin counties.

Caltrans calculates the worst commutes for its annual survey by sending drivers onto the region's freeways several days a year and adding up the number of hours they spend driving slower than 35 mph in commute-hour traffic. The information is extrapolated to add up to a year's worth of commutes.

As for the region's worst commute -- to the Bay Bridge -- transportation officials acknowledge that it's not feasible to widen I-80. They'll focus instead on using technology to improve the commute.

Sartipi said ramp metering, driving-time information signs, traffic monitors embedded in the pavement, closed-circuit television systems and the 511 transportation information Web site and phone line can be better used to help detect problems and control traffic.

"What we need to do is understand what is happening -- and react," he said. "We cannot use the previous approaches of adding capacity and lanes. We have to manage the system."

But many road-weary commuters are griping about the way things are now.

"I'm spending twice as long as I used to," Enrique Povar, a South San Francisco resident who works as a tailor in downtown San Francisco, said Tuesday. "It used to take 15 to 20 minutes. Now it takes a half hour or longer. In peak hours, it's crazy."

TRAFFIC TROUBLE SPOTS

Freeway segments with the most delay during commute hours in 2005

(ranked 1 to 5; 1= longest delay)

Daily (weekday) vehicle

Hours of delay* Rank Rank Rank Rank

2005 rank/Location 2005 2004 2005 2004 2003 2002

1. Interstate 80, westbound, a.m. Alameda/Contra Costa County, State Route 4 to Bay Bridge metering lights

10,930 10,080 1 1 1 1

2. Interstate 580, eastbound, p.m. Alameda County, Interstate 680 to east of El Charro Road

6,100 4,320 3 3 3 4

3. Interstate 580, westbound, a.m. Alameda County, West of North Flynn Road to Airway Boulevard

5,830 5,120 2 3 5 12

4. U.S. 101, northbound and Interstate 80, eastbound, p.m.: San Francisco, U.S. 101 from Alemany Boulevard to I-80; I-80 from U.S. 101 to Sterling Street on-ramp

5,140 3,840 4 2 4 8

5. U.S. 101, southbound, a.m.: Marin County, south of Route 37 to Interstate 580

4,490 3,110 7 6 9 7

* Vehicle hours of delay is the estimated amount of time vehicles spend traveling 35 mph or slower. Caltrans calculates the figure using the floating-car method in which drivers travel the region's highways and record the time spent driving below 35 mph.

Sources: ESRI, Metropolitan Transportation Commission

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Page A - 1

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