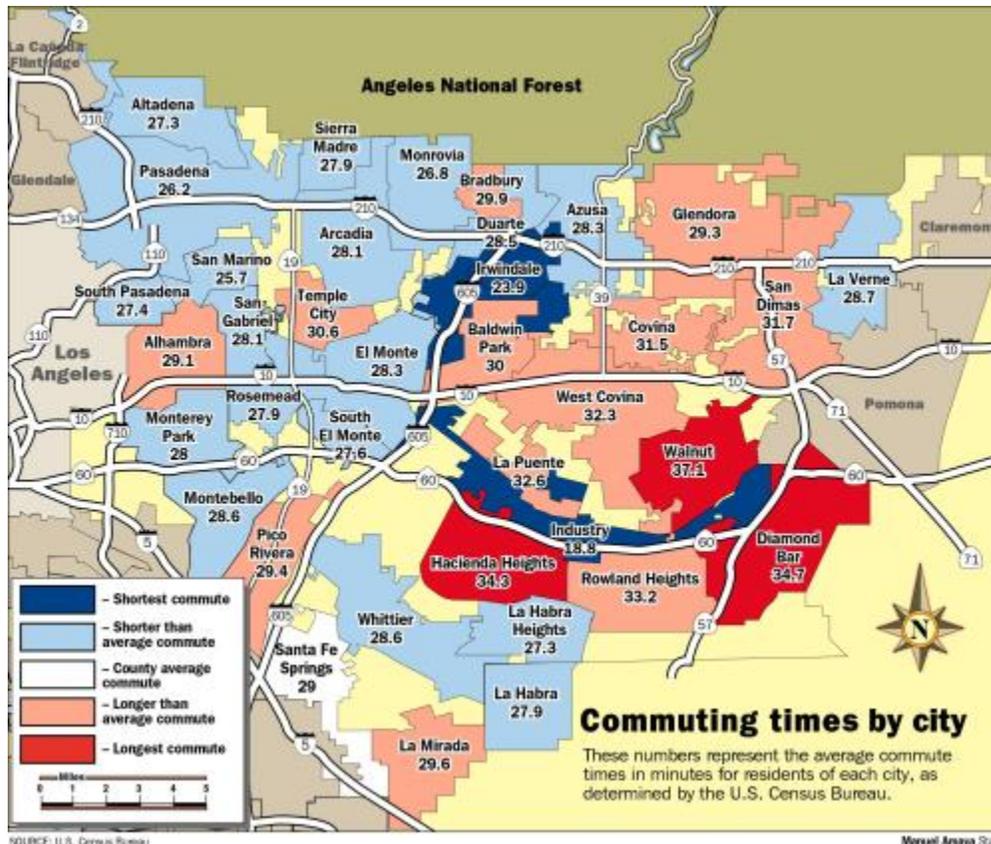


Those living along 60 Freeway have longest commutes in Valley_12/27/11

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Southern California, with its hundreds of miles of freeways and far-flung residential subdivisions, has often been noted for being prone to aggravating traffic and lengthy commutes.

But as many residents know all too well, not all commutes are created equal.

In the San Gabriel Valley, the situation can generally be summed up like this: Commuters heading west in the morning will face a wall of brake lights, while their east-bound counterparts are likely to find wide-open roads. In the afternoon, the whole arrangement does a U-turn.

Data recently released by the U.S. Census Bureau paints a much more nuanced picture.

Earlier this month, the U.S. Census Bureau released its 2006-2010 American Community Survey estimates.

Among the things the Census Bureau queried people about was how long it takes them to drive to work. The bureau then took their answers and calculated the average commute time for thousands of regions across the country.

Overall, American commuters spend about 25 minutes driving to work. For Californians, the time is slightly longer - nearly 27 minutes. Los Angeles County drivers face even lengthier commutes - 29 minutes on average.

In the San Gabriel Valley area, average commute times can vary quite a bit, depending on where a person lives.

Commuters living in Industry, a city of about 200 residents and thousands of warehouses, have it the best. They spend less than 20 minutes commuting to. Residents of the similarly industrial Irwindale also fare well. Their commutes are about 5 minutes shorter than the county average.

But neither of those cities fits into regional patterns. Looking more broadly, residents of cities in the Pasadena area tend to have commutes shorter than the county average. Residents of the eastern San Gabriel Valley tend to have commutes longer than the county average. Whittier-area cities tend to be fairly close to the county average.

The longest commutes of all belong to the residents of Walnut. On average, they spend about 37 minutes driving to work.

The next longest average commute is nearly 35 minutes and belongs to Diamond Bar residents. Residents of Hacienda Heights have commutes nearly as long - slightly more than 34 minutes.

The common thread among these areas is that they're located along the 60 Freeway.

As it turns out, six of the 10 cities and county areas with the longest commute times are along the 60.

"I could have told you that without looking at this," said Ryan Colley, 31, of Victorville, while holding a map showing commute times for San Gabriel Valley cities.

Colley works as a gas-station technician. The company he works for is located in Ontario, but his job takes him to gas stations all across the San Gabriel Valley.

"I find that the 60 (Freeway) is always packed," Colley said. "It's always bad from the 57 to the 605."

Colley couldn't pinpoint one thing that made the 60 worse than any other freeway. "Just traffic" and "a big concentration of people," he said.

"I go to a lot of Dodger games," Colley said. "Every time I take the 60, it's an extra 30 minutes. What's to blame?"

It would be easy to blame the freeway for the congestion - and many people do - but officials said there are larger forces at work.

Xudong Jia, a professor of transportation engineering at Cal Poly Pomona, laid the blame for long commute times on poor urban planning.

"If you look at Diamond Bar - that's the place I live in - the majority of land use here is residential," Jia said. "We don't have a lot of shopping centers. Because it's residential, (motorists) have to go to other places."

To illustrate his point, Jia pointed to cities located along the 210 Freeway, which tend to have more varied land use. La Verne, which is even farther east than Diamond Bar, manages to have an average commute time shorter than that of the county.

"If you look at San Dimas, La Verne, they may have several business centers there," Jia said. "So people can live in the city and go to the same city (for work.)"

Jack Tanaka, Diamond Bar city councilman, partially agreed, but said he thinks most of Diamond Bar's traffic problems are the result of its location at the nexus of the San Gabriel Valley, Orange County and the Inland Empire. "Most of the time it's commuters coming through the city," Tanaka said. "That's probably most of the complaints. It's kind of aggravating when it's not local traffic, but traffic from outside the city."

Tom King, Walnut city councilman, also spoke about the impact traffic congestion has on his city's residents.

"It does waste a lot of people's time," King said. "It stresses people out and makes people late for things." King, a retired police detective, spent 30 years commuting to Los Angeles.

"Boy, I had a million pounds lifted off my back when I quit," King said.

King blamed Walnut's lengthy commutes on the many railroad crossings in the area and its proximity to Industry - a source of heavy truck traffic.

Rich Macias, director of transportation planning for the Southern California Association of Governments, agreed that trucks play a large role in traffic congestion in the area.

According to SCAG's 2012-2035 Regional Transportation Plan, 24,000 trucks passed through the Valley each day on the 60 Freeway. SCAG predicts that number will rise to 41,000 trucks daily by 2035.

"Where you have a tremendous amount of truck traffic, it's going to help exacerbate congestion, it's going to exacerbate air quality emissions," Macias said.

Little money for solutions

Macias said it's for the above reasons that SCAG is pushing the idea of special lanes that would keep truck traffic separated from passenger-vehicle traffic along the 60 Freeway.

The 50-foot-high truck lanes would run alongside San Jose Creek, parallel to the freeway.

"In essence the project functions as a dedicated truck way," Macias said. "It creates capacity that the trucks are eating up."

Like many ambitious projects, the truck way faces opposition in some circles. Diamond Bar Councilwoman Carol Herrera voted against the plan in November. (However, the plan got unanimous support in a December vote.) Councilman King also opposes it.

"I didn't support the truck lane over the San Jose Creek because of the proximity to homes," King said. "People would look right out their windows and see trucks."

The cost of SCAG's plan has also ruffled some feathers. To make the \$450 billion in upgrades it wants for the region's roads, bridges, bike paths and rail lines, SCAG would need increased taxes.

"It's all very expensive," King said. "There's no money for it."

For now, Walnut is taking small steps toward reducing the impact traffic has on its residents, King said. Like many cities, it offers a subsidy for those who purchase Metrolink tickets. It also has a dial-a-ride service for its seniors.

Professor Jia said local governments should look for both long- and short-term solutions to their traffic problems.

A long-term goal, Jia said, should involve developing urban cores in otherwise suburban cities, so residents don't have to drive as far to work.

"You need to look at the relationship between the land use and the roadway system," he said. "You're trying to resolve the issue within the city itself."

Councilman Tanaka said he would like to see a business center in his city, but he doesn't think it's likely to happen.

"Even though Diamond Bar doesn't have a downtown, I would like to see us maybe develop one at Diamond Bar Boulevard and Grand," he said. "(But) with the city being pretty much built out, there isn't a whole lot of land to develop."

Tanaka added that the state's attempts to dissolve city redevelopment agencies makes it even less likely Diamond Bar will undertake any major business developments.

In the short term, Jia said cities and regional governments should take steps to ensure their existing roads are being used as efficiently as possible. He said coordinated traffic signals can go a long way toward making traffic flow smoothly.

He also predicted the development of intelligent transportation systems that detect how traffic is flowing. Tanaka said Diamond Bar has already begun implementing some of these technologies.

"We are just about completed with our traffic management system," he said.

That plan includes synchronized traffic signals along Golden Springs Drive and Grand Avenue, as well as traffic cameras at major intersections in the city.

Tanaka said once the cameras are operational, traffic engineers will be able to adjust the timing of stop lights to meet "real-time" traffic demands.

"Our traffic engineers are constantly looking for ways to move traffic through the city," he said.