



Contemporary California Society

California, in the early twenty-first century, remained the land of opportunity for a never-ending flow of newcomers from across the nation and around the world. Demographers predicted that the number of Californians would swell to more than 50 million by the year 2040. This burgeoning population put a tremendous strain on the state's infrastructure, including such basic services as transportation, education, health care, and the criminal justice system. Meanwhile, evidence mounted of a growing polarization of California society into a privileged upper class and an exploding under class of frustrated Californians dependent on a system of inadequate and deteriorating public services. Researchers at the Public Policy Institute of California concluded in 2004 that, despite the state's relative prosperity, the "inequality between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' [is] one of the most serious societal problems facing the state today."

Transportation

The most visible and agonizing consequence of population growth was the growing congestion of the state's more than 166,000 miles of streets and highways. The problem was particularly severe in major metropolitan areas, where freeways filled daily with bumper-to-bumper traffic. The nation's two most congested areas were both in California—Los Angeles—Long Beach—Santa Ana followed by San Francisco—Oakland. Transportation officials predicted that by 2020 traffic delays in the San Francisco Bay area would increase by nearly 250 percent and that average speeds on Los Angeles freeways would drop to just 19 miles per hour. The psychological and economic consequences of such calamities were awesome. "Traffic congestion is one of the most frustrating experiences people go through every day," observed a spokesperson for the California Chamber of Commerce.

The underlying cause of the congestion was readily apparent. During the last two decades of the twentieth century, the number of California motorists increased

by about 50 percent whereas the capacity of the state highway system grew by only 7 percent.

The major barrier to achieving a solution to the state's transportation problem was the enormous cost involved. Building new freeways where they were needed most, in congested urban areas, had become prohibitively expensive. Construction of the Century Freeway in Los Angeles cost the state over \$100 million a mile. While the expense of new construction soared, the willingness of Californians to pay for transportation improvements lagged far behind. The state gasoline tax, the main source of revenue for freeway construction, was among the lowest in the nation. In terms of per capita spending on highways, California slipped to dead last among the 50 states.

The state legislature in 1989 enacted an innovative plan to authorize private firms to build new highways and to collect tolls from the motorists who used them. Orange County's Foothill Tollway, the first toll road built in California since the depression, opened in the mid-1990s. Elsewhere in the state, carpool lanes were opened to well-heeled drivers willing to pay extra to avoid clogged freeways. Critics derided the "Lexus lanes" as elitist and charged that toll roads represented an unwelcome privatization of the state's infrastructure, leading eventually to "a two-tiered transit system with the affluent motoring along well-kept tollways and the poor bumping along from pothole to pothole."

The first signs of a new willingness of voters to support needed improvements in the public transportation system came in 1990 with the approval of a ballot initiative that doubled the state's gasoline tax. It was the largest single increase since the tax was first enacted in 1923. Revenue from the increased tax was used for an \$18.5 billion program of new highway and railroad construction, the largest single transportation investment in state history.

Voters in 1990 also approved two bond measures that outlined specific road-building and mass transit projects. Improvements included expanding the Bay Area Rapid Transit system (BART) and the San Diego and San Jose trolleys, and constructing new commuter rail lines in the Los Angeles basin. In 1993 a new 4-mile subway, dubbed the Metro Red Line, began carrying passengers in downtown Los Angeles. Nearly 200 miles of Metrolink commuter rail lines also connected the city center with outlying communities in Orange, San Bernardino, Ventura, and Riverside counties. Spanning about 20 miles, the Metro Green Line carried passengers from Norwalk to Marine/Redondo. The Metro Blue Line, an electric light-rail trolley, began operating between Los Angeles and Long Beach. The Blue Line was the first interurban rail line in the Los Angeles basin since the last of the Pacific Electric's Red Car rail lines were torn up in 1961 to make way for the freeways. The new light-rail line followed almost exactly the route of the last Pacific Electric line.

The sustained economic boom of the late 1990s increased congestion in each of California's major urban areas and led to a new round of measures to improve the state's overburdened transportation system.

Some of the worst congestion was in and around Silicon Valley. South Bay commuters spent 4 to 5 hours a day traveling to and from their homes in far-flung suburbs. The *San Francisco Chronicle* warned that "traffic gridlock is one of the greatest