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Should Caltrans be Twittering?

I received the following email this morning from Victor Franco Jr., a lobbyist in Los Angeles. I gather that his commute on Thursday morning was most unpleasant, with the 405 being closed a spell due to the brush fire in Brentwood.

Here's what Victor had to say. I'll discuss the remedy below.

Steven



If you want to print this, I'm ok with that.

Question for the Bottleneck Blogger:

In viewing the recent fire in the Sepulveda Pass on television early Thursday, you could not avoid seeing the thousands of motorists who were stuck by the massive freeway closure. In SoCal, since we are so reliant on freeways, this happens more times than not -- including the recent "wrong way drivers" on the 118 in Chatsworth during that brush fire.


Mr. Blogger, shouldn't we create a system that alerts driver of impending trouble or large closures? How about an Emergency Broadcast System for drivers? Maybe a radio channel similar to that station at LAX or sporting venues that warns drivers? Maybe we should create a closure "freeway

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venues that warns drivers? maybe we should create a closure response team" that say 15 miles away from the disaster, they can drop-off changeable message signs or other types of notifications to warn drivers before they enter a traffic emergency zone to take alternate freeway or street routes.

While the detours from the fire could have added possibly an hour or more to many drivers commute, it would be better than sitting in a closure area, being frustrated and angry and taking away from police or CHP resources managing thousands of stuck cars.

This system could even have daily usage on heavy or Sig-alerted freeway incidents.

Lastly, traffic reporters need to be more proactive, not just telling us about an incident, but suggesting alternate routes on their radio and television broadcasts or even the internet if you surf before you leave home.

Our commute hassle should be handled before you turn the car on.

Victor Franco Jr

Traffic-hating Lobbyist

Information is still king.

Victor is absolutely correct that getting good real-time information here is a bear. Motorists, for example, could go on the [Caltrans road condition website](#) and type in a road number to see if it's closed, but should you really have to type in several freeways each morning? And, besides, that website often doesn't provide information about accidents.

There are also the [real-time traffic maps](#) that can be seen on the Caltrans website, as well as the privately-run [Signalert website](#). But it's the same problem -- you have to go to the information and glean from it what you need. Wouldn't it be great if the information came to you?

This is where Caltrans and municipal transportation agencies could take a quick lesson from Metrolink, the commuter rail carrier, or the [Los Angeles Fire Department](#), which has a service to automatically call residents to alert them of red flag warnings. A few months back, [Metrolink began sending text messages to commuters using Twitter](#), the popular text messaging service. It's extremely simple (and free) and the messages go straight to your phone. The service allows you to sign up to receive other people's "tweets" -- short messages of 140 characters or less.

On Thursday morning, I turned on my cellphone and found this message from Metrolink:

Metrolink: Inl. Empire-OC Line train 803 delayed 30 min. into San Clem. stn. due to meeting late OC Line train 607

The obvious question here is if Metrolink can do this, why not a giant agency such as Caltrans? What if Victor awoke Thursday to this message:

Caltrans: 405 closed due to brush fire in Brentwood. Avoid at all costs. Alternates: 101 or 5. If possible, delay your morning commute.

Caltrans does offer a [text messaging service that provides travel times](#). But that's different -- you can choose to have the same information that is displayed on its freeway signs sent to your cellphone (for example, a sign on the 101 northbound in the SFV may read minutes to 126...45).

I'll talk to the Caltrans folks and see if this is possible. The agency maintains a 24-7 operations center in the Glendale area -- basically it looks like mission control -- and it seems as if there should be one person available to send text messages, at least about major closures. And there are a lot of transit agencies around the world that send service alerts either via text messages or emails, although the quality of the alert greatly differs.

Any thoughts, readers?

After the jump, you'll find a story I wrote in February about a large experiment in the Bay Area, where researchers are trying to both collect traffic data and distribute traffic alerts via cell phones. It's some very cool stuff and gets back to the main question Victor broaches up above.

-- **Steve Hyman**

Using cellphones to beat traffic?

A trial using GPS-equipped mobile units provides a picture of freeway speeds. Now -- how to get the information to motorists.

February 09, 2008 in print edition B-3

A fleet of 100 cars rolled onto a Bay Area interstate Friday to begin perfecting a tool that could one day transform the lives of commuters around the world.

Maybe.



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Our Blogger



Steve Hyman is The Times' Road Sage. He covers traffic and transportation in a region united by a confounding network of freeways that frustrate drivers daily. The Bottleneck Blog is Steve's website home, where he breaks transportation news, reports on traffic tie-ups and brings a critical but humorous

eye to commuting in Southern California. You can reach Steve at steve.hyman@latimes.com.

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With San Francisco Bay shimmering to the west, university students drove the cars all day back and forth along Interstate 880. Each was carrying a cellphone loaded with Global Positioning System software. And as they drove, it beamed back signals that researchers shaped into a real-time map of traffic speeds.

Of course, maps of freeway conditions already exist and are popular. Who doesn't know about SigAlert.com or Google maps?

But in the ubiquitous cellphone, some researchers see a two-way device that can not only gather high-quality data on what's happening on the road, but then deliver information to

motorists on which route they should take to shave time from their travels. "Getting that information back to the drivers, that's the Holy Grail – so drivers can make smart decisions about their commute," said Thomas West, director of the at UC Berkeley, one of the backers of Friday's experiment.

Not surprisingly, the main sponsor was Nokia, which sells about 450 million cellphones each year. With GPS expected to become a regular feature on cellphones, Nokia officials are trying to develop more applications that users may want.

"It would be great if the phone, instead of saying go left or right, would say you're meeting so-and-so at 10 a.m. and because traffic is picking up, you should leave now and you should avoid [a particular] exit because traffic is backing up," said Bob Iannucci, Nokia's chief technology officer.

Some transportation officials believe the technology may be helpful, but they are skeptical about its ability to substantially ease commutes. They say that in many instances it's doubtful that a machine can tell savvy motorists anything they don't already know from years of driving.

"During the peak of the peak of the commute all the roads are pretty much congested, and if a road isn't congested and it goes anywhere, people will find it" without the aid of a computer, said Shawn Turner, a traffic engineer with the .

Turner, nonetheless, believes the technology is worth pursuing but may work best for those driving in unfamiliar areas or to help alert motorists to accidents during times when traffic is heavy.

The push by high-tech firms coincides with a decades-long effort in many cities to squeeze more capacity out of existing roads because it has proved difficult to find the money, space and public support for building new ones. As a result, one strategy has been to encourage motorists to use roads more efficiently.

Since the 1970s, the California Department of Transportation has installed thousands of sensors below freeways to monitor traffic. Information from those sensors allows the extrapolation of traffic speeds, which are displayed on traffic websites.

But sensors, which are expensive to install and can break down, are in short supply on some freeways. And that has led many to believe that the better way to electronically measure traffic is to put monitoring equipment inside vehicles. The other big advantage is that GPS also allows vehicles to be tracked on surface streets.

If such data can be sufficiently crunched and combined with existing sensor data, researchers hope to build a service that tells people how to get from point A to point B in the shortest time.

"As a user you are not only contributing to the data, but you are benefiting from it by looking at it in real time on your phone," said Alexandre Bayen, an assistant professor in civil engineering at UC Berkeley who is heading the project.

As part of Friday's experiment, which Bayen said was successful, the cellphone data was stripped of personal information to alleviate concerns that Big Brother – or perhaps a divorce attorney – could ever use the information to show that a person who said he was driving to the grocery actually strayed off-course.

Iannucci, of Nokia, said smaller-scale experiments have been successful and the next step would likely involve a road test on an even larger scale for a longer time. As to how soon the company could bring a product to market, Iannucci said he couldn't predict, but that Nokia's research arm generally works in two- to seven-year time frames.

It remains to be seen if cellphones will be the device that consumers favor. The

Sunnyvale-based firm will soon begin selling an in-car directional system – with a screen much larger than a cellphone's.

It also uses similar technology to recommend to motorists the three best ways to get to their destination, based on real-time highway speeds gathered from road sensors and other Dash system users.

"What you want to know as a consumer is a solution – you don't just want a bunch of data," said Rob Currie, the company's president and chief operating officer. "You want to know that, today, this is the best route home."

Currie believes his system's larger screen will make it preferable to cellphones. Others, however, suggest there may come a day when cellphones can be plugged into in-car computer screens that some expect to become more prevalent.

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Another question is whether any real-time data can actually reduce commute times, particularly if everyone begins using it. One answer may be found in the sprawling, auto-dependent Houston area.

Houston Transtar, a partnership of four government agencies that oversees roadways in the region, has for several years produced electronic maps with traffic speeds. The maps – which got 12 million web hits in January – are generated by tracking cars that have toll-road transponders, even when they are not traveling on area toll roads.

That, in turn, allows the agency to offer a service that tells motorists exactly how long their commute will take on a particular freeway. Officials don't think the system has reduced traffic, but they believe motorists are using the information and that has helped prevent traffic from worsening. But Transtar has stopped short of offering alternative routes. Officials say it goes against the nature of Texas to tell people where they should drive. Also, for liability reasons, they don't want to get into the business of steering traffic off freeways and through communities that don't want short-cutters.

"We're trying to give drivers enough information to make those decisions themselves," said Jack Whaley, the director of Houston Transtar. "If someone is commuting, they know all the alternatives. People aren't stupid."

steve.hymon@latimes.com

October 24, 2008 in [Technology](#) | [Permalink](#)

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I'd love it if the bus lines could figure out a way to do this, too.

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