



Caltrans Division of Research,
Innovation and System Information

Research

Notes

Planning, Policy
and Program
Development

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Project Title:
Shifting from LOS to VMT as the Measure
of Transportation Impacts: Evaluating
Prospects for Implementing Senate Bill 743

Task Number: 2886

Start Date: May 1, 2016

Completion Date: April 30, 2017

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Shifting from LOS to VMT as the Measure of Transportation Impact Assessment

Clarifying challenges and opportunities in implementing VMT analysis under CEQA, as well as the practical challenges of developing workable, accurate, and acceptably consistent VMT analysis techniques.

WHAT IS THE NEED?

California's Senate Bill (SB) 743, enacted in 2013, marks a historic policy shift in evaluation and mitigation of traffic impacts of development projects. To help achieve state climate policy and sustainability goals, SB 743 eliminates traffic delay as an environmental impact under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), requiring instead assessment of vehicle miles traveled (VMT). Recently proposed state implementation guidelines have sparked debate, raising far-reaching questions about development planning. SB 743 may enable opportunities for promoting efficient development patterns. But the debates over OPR's proposals have been contentious. A project clarifying challenges and opportunities for localities in implementing VMT analysis under CEQA, as well as the practical challenges of developing workable, accurate, and acceptably consistent VMT analysis techniques across the state, would provide useful input for smoothing the transition from LOS to VMT-oriented traffic planning.

WHAT ARE WE DOING?

Using a case study approach, the research will consist of two parts. The first will evaluate tools-in-use for estimating VMT impacts of development projects, considering outputs in connection to the best available research on the subject, and also against the proposed state rules for determining significant effects that require mitigation. We will evaluate how well the tools and proposed guidelines distinguish high- and low-performing projects, and how well they serve to streamline project-level analysis from plan-level analysis – a goal of SB 743. The second component will consist of interviews with local CEQA practitioners and assessment of pertinent documents on CEQA review, to identify challenges for implementing SB 743 at the local level.



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WHAT IS OUR GOAL?

The main research goal will be to test and compare techniques for evaluating VMT, consider the outputs in connection to OPR's proposed thresholds for determining significance of effects, and, based on interviews with practitioners intimately familiar with conducting CEQA review, identify potential pitfalls as well as best practices for effective VMT assessment methods.

WHAT IS THE BENEFIT?

This research will help policymakers and planners address consequences, foreseen and unanticipated, of SB 743 implementation, regarding both the feasibility and validity of technical tools, as well as the challenges and opportunities of determining significance thresholds and linking project-to-plan-level analysis. The research will identify effective VMT assessment techniques that state policymakers may want to recommend to local agencies.

WHAT IS THE PROGRESS TO DATE?

The task order contract has been executed and work on this study will begin on May 1, 2016.



State Route 28 in Sunnyside-Tahoe City

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