

# Focus Group Report

## Regional Transportation & Local Development Voter Attitudes & Perspectives April 2010

Prepared by

*ActionMedia* for:

Climate Plan Coalition

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## INTRODUCTION

*“You learn how to get places. You find a route. And you try to plan against traffic. It might not be the most direct route but it will probably be the quickest.”* Cindy, Modesto

*“People in general don’t like to move. I think there’s a social value of establishing roots and making friends and knowing your neighbor. That’s how southern California is. To decide to move because of transportation, or gas...?”* Ron, Los Angeles

*“They’re going to build it as they did there (in Fullerton), it’s going to be local communities for you right there, and the buses are going to be just in that little community.”*

*Q: Do you think it’s a good idea?*

*“Yes. Because they will be sustained, they won’t have to go out on the freeways to work, so it’s going to be a whole...there’ll be a whole village within a village. And the Metrolink is right there. So they’ll have the community and then people can go to San Diego to work, they can go to Los Angeles, they can go to Santa Ana or they will be right next to the Metrolink when they get off.”* Robin, Irvine

In late April 2010, six focus groups were conducted (two each in Los Angeles, Irvine and Modesto, CA) with voters who follow the news. Detail on the fifty-two participants is attached to this report. Each group included a mix of political perspectives, and people with a range of experience in using public transportation.

The research was aimed at discovering what values and perspectives are shared across demographic differences. The findings reveal that voters in these locations can reason their way toward conclusions supportive of policy resulting in increased transit, and compact development that localizes affordable homes, retail, services, and employment. But this agenda is *not seen as solutions to a set of problems*. Voters are positive about these results when considered as *an opportunity -- to boost the economy, and to make better places to live*.

The location of home, or where they live, is much more important to them than location of work or how they travel. For this reason, respondents are cool to the proposition that we need homes closer to jobs. They want jobs closer to home. Similarly, public transit as an objective is divisive along ideological lines because it triggers attitudes toward government, race and class. But government investment in rail, as an incentive for local development, is widely supported across these and other divides.

These Californians view traffic congestion as causing a range of serious problems, including for human health and for business. They think about transportation without distinguishing between driving and transit. The primary value is convenience, point-to-point, which makes buses a last resort. Unless departure and arrival points are exactly aligned, no one wants to ride the bus. Many respondents, especially those in their 20s, 30s and 40, are positive to enthusiastic about development of rail, and view it as combined with auto use.

There is significant opportunity for public communications to build support for better transportation planning. Voters in these communities universally agree that investment in rail attracts investment in homes, retail, and other businesses; that development that offers the convenience of mixed uses is attractive, if not to them personally than to others; and that opportunity for local development will be increased by local governments working regionally to foster better transportation planning, including rail.

Reasoning from a story about transportation, and especially about public transit, immediately triggers the limitations of government. But from a story about local development and local convenience, even those most strongly anti-tax see an important role for government, in infrastructure investment.

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## TRAFFIC AND ITS COSTS

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*I just leave ahead of time to go places. It's something I accept. There's nothing I can do that I can change it. The only thing I can change is me, and I can move out of town. Right now, I'm just staying, so I learn to cope with it. I relax. If somebody wants to start yelling at me or whatever, I'm not going to aggravate it. OK. So I do leave early during the day. I left work at four. I was here at 4:25 at the park on the side street, sit there and read until whatever, and I was fine. I listen to the radio and..." -- Stella, LA*

*"I know a lot of sales people, and it sounds crazy, but their sales territory is LA. And so, of course, there's a limited amount of money and contacts in that one-on-one appointments that you can make between eight and five in LA. So that is affecting people to the traffic. That's the first thing you have to take into consideration. It affects your income." -- CJ, Los Angeles*

People hold, quite stubbornly, to their coping strategies. Several suggested that increased mobile technology, whether phone, audio, or GPS to get real time traffic reports, have made being stuck in traffic more tolerable and, in some cases, potentially more productive than it used to be. The primary coping strategy is adaptation and adjustment. Respondents cannot imagine their area without people in cars, and they believe it's an inevitable price of living in California. More than a few of the men even describe their coping mechanisms in terms of a game, "beating the traffic."

When asked to consider social costs beyond any one individual's inconvenience, the first response offered in every group was either individual health effects of smog, or mental health effects of stress and anger. All groups also viewed traffic as bad for business – either in access for or to customers, reduced ability to make appointments or sales calls, and loss of productivity, including co-workers coming to work stressed from traffic.

**Recommendation:** Be explicit about the current system's costs to business, using business people as messengers talking about their own experience and the general economic impact. Use this as a set-up for discussion of economic opportunity through more transportation choices.

When prompted to consider resource depletion or dependence on foreign fuels, respondents immediately doubted the premise, or began talking about fuel efficient cars and American fuel sources (the research was conducted prior to the BP oil well disaster). Not a single respondent, including those whose other comments suggested a relatively high level of environmental awareness, ever mentioned climate change as a shared cost of traffic congestion.

**Recommendation:** Define the environmental benefits of reduced reliance on automobiles in terms of individual health and especially clean air. Talk about air pollution, not carbon emissions. Do not talk about independence from foreign fuels or resource depletion – these lead to discussion of car technologies and US fuel sources.

**Recommendation:** Evoke the costs to mental health indirectly, through frequent use of trigger words including stress, frustration, pressure, congestion, maddening, wasted time, et al. (all of which can be well applied to economic and political topics as easily as to traffic.)

## HOME, WORK AND LOCAL DEVELOPMENT

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*“There are a lot of people who, really I would pick a city more for the school district than for traffic or a job.” - Marci, Los Angeles*

*“Like we said, everybody wants to work close to home if you can, that's awesome. But if you can't you have to do what you have to do.” - Patrick, Irvine*

*“Universal Studios is doing a great thing. They're creating this whole community which is gonna be starting building soon, it's like over 25,000 jobs that they're creating just construction work, and after that, it's going to be pretty close to that number of people who will be living there and working at the Universal Studios and city work and all that. So, it's like a whole community that they're building and it's been built right to the subway. I guess even for those who don't work there it's going to be great.” -- Alex, Los Angeles*

Respondents cite affordability as a key factor in limiting their and other wage earners' ability to choose and find a place to live. They know this problem from their own experience, and have no difficulty in imagining that it is harder for people earning less than they do. They explain that people have moved farther and farther away from jobs and older developments in search of homes they can afford. At the same time, the collapse of the housing market and the foreclosure crisis reinforces concerns about affordability, and leads people to emphasize the importance of economic recovery and job creation.

However, none of this leads them to reason that the area needs more housing closer to jobs. Choosing where to live is a function of several factors in addition to affordability, relating to schools, family, and life-style issues. Where they live is more important to them than where they work – it's a more stable, long-term and personal decision than the decisions they make about employment.

When prompted to consider the question from the perspective of homes closer to jobs, respondents in most groups talk about the trend of telecommuting or working off hours, or of making choices about where to work – not where to live - that lead to shorter commutes. Some spoke of career changes made in part to keep them closer to home. Several respondents in Los Angeles and Orange County spoke approvingly of “live/work” arrangements, and offered the perspective that some combination of these were becoming increasingly popular. It was observed that for creative workers and entrepreneurs, the ability to have home and work co-located is an important attraction.

**Recommendation:** Talk about increasing the supply of homes people can afford, applying the same values of convenience, and choice, as well as economic opportunity. When raising issues of class, talk about economic disparities in terms of a housing market that meets the full range of needs, and in terms of job creation – not in terms of increased investment in public transit.

*“What has saved downtown LA, what has revived it, has been private money going in, people willing to take a risk and build down there, something affordable, something that people wanted, close to employment and then other people came in with government money, you have a whole society down there that is trying to revive the theater systems and make downtown LA a livable place.”  
William R, Los Angeles*

*“I think they definitely need to improve downtown. They’ve been expanding farther and farther east, you know, like I said there’s a bunch of empty lots out that way and, you know, my folks live out in the east side of town and a lot of people in that area they actually head over to Riverbank because they built this big huge shopping center over there. So, instead of building that inside the city limits of Modesto, all that money is going out of town.” - Michael M, Modesto*

Many respondents stated that, in current economic conditions, any job is worth taking. This was especially pronounced in Modesto. One long-time job seeker reported that many employment ads include the phrase “local applicants only”. The group discussed this phenomenon, and speculated that it reflected the employer’s concern about the costs of long commutes.

**Recommendation:** Talk about creating jobs closer to where people live. This reverses the standard advocacy proposition that we need homes closer to jobs. Evoke and acknowledge opportunities for live/work arrangements, increased telecommuting and development of local employment. This is a lead in for discussion of building neighborhoods and communities that are attractive and convenient, make more efficient use of land, and add to the local economy.

The economy also leads respondents to reason that better planning will result in better use of existing places. In Modesto in particular, respondents attribute to poor local planning in the Valley the wasteful development of expanses of single family homes, leap-frogging over open space. They describe the desirability of land use patterns that will fill in existing developed space rather than sprawl ever outward.

**Recommendation:** Be explicit about re-use of abandoned or under-used properties, including downtown revitalizations. Be specific about what routes, corridors, and properties represent opportunity.

There is a high value placed on being able to stay “local”. In addition to “live/work” arrangements and telecommuting, respondents spoke approvingly of developments that have “everything right there” – schools, homes, shopping and services. Respondents discussed these developments in very positive and affectionate terms, indicating that they themselves do or would like to live in such a place; that they would like to have access to such a place; and/or that there is a market for such developments. They see local private-sector growth and investment opportunities that, if seized upon, would be good for the over-all economy of their communities. They do not use the phrases common among land use planners, such as “mixed use” or “transit oriented development.” They refer to such places as being well-planned communities, and in terms of personal convenience and choices.

*“I think anytime you have a key transportation source, be it light rail or highway or something like that, you're going to attract...” Jim, (R) Modesto*

*“--the smart money.” John (R)*

*“...you're going to attract all kinds of investment.” Jim*

*Q: You're a taxpayer in Modesto. Do you think if Modesto gets that rail line it's going to be good for you? I don't mean good to use as a rider, I mean good for the local economy.*

*“I think whoever gets it has to benefit. I think there's plenty of proof to show any mode of transportation, you know.” - Paul (I), Modesto*

Virtually everyone has some kind of experience of, and positive attitudes toward, compact, well planned areas that provide convenience by locating jobs, retail, services and homes in close proximity to each other. This thinking also applies to positive attitudes in Los Angeles toward making downtown a more attractive place to live and to visit. In Orange County, it was observed that “there is no downtown Irvine”, but some respondents expressed their interest in Downtown LA as a destination. In Modesto, there was broad interest expressed in revitalizing the downtown area through better planning and policies designed to attract investment.

Respondents all recognize that investment in rail attracts investment in land use around rail stations, and that this market requires a range of prices of homes, convenience of shopping and walking, and will attract further business development, leading to more jobs where people live. In Modesto, an additional benefit of such planning was identified as preserving farmland, and reducing the wasteful development of open space,

A key aspect of this perspective, discussed further in the Government section below, is that this type of policy is market driven. It creates opportunity for private investment, rather than relying primarily on public investment; and that the projected development will meet local needs, not merely needs of others at distant sites.

**Recommendation:** Start from the perspective of local communities, local development and local economic opportunity. Talk about transportation choices and opportunities as part of this broader topic. This puts regional transportation planning far down in the information hierarchy, as a means toward clearly defined ends. Talk about what kinds of communities we can build, and how we can spur private investment.

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## Public Transit and Transportation Planning

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*“I don’t understand where these transportation corridors are going to be, because Irvine’s all built up already. I just can’t envision it unless they tear things down or they go back, they start the whole triple decking freeways.” -- Frank, Irvine*

*“The corridors are already in place. You have the East West corridor from Glendora into Pasadena, Arcadia and to downtown Los Angeles to the train rails. You have the Alameda corridor coming above the Long Beach. You have a corridor coming down quite a bit down in the San Fernando Valley, so the spokes are already there.” - Bill, Irvine*

*“At the end of the day, what options do people have? If you have an option to take public transport, I think people will consider it. But if it means driving half an hour to get to the beginning of the public transport and then paying \$10 to leave your car and then arriving at a point which is nowhere near where you want to be, people will say that that doesn't work.” -- Nicholas, Los Angeles*

“Public transportation” is not a useful concept for respondents, because it includes two radically different kinds of transportation – bus and rail. Attitudes toward these two modes are significantly different, with buses perceived as undesirable while rail is viewed as potentially more efficient and innovative. Broad statements about “public transportation” also trigger unhelpful comparisons to New York City, “back East”, or, most damningly, “the Bay Area” as being too unlike southern California or the Central Valley for similar solutions to work.

**Recommendation:** Do not define reduced auto use primarily as a solution to a problem, but as a direct benefit: more options for getting from point A to B. Citizens will still have their cars, they just may not choose to use them all the time.

**Recommendation:** Inoculate against comparisons to “back east” or “the Bay Area” by frequent mention of specific local routes and places, and discuss increased use of transit in terms that clearly include combinations of cars and other transportation modes.

Buses are especially problematic for respondents, for a number of reasons. Chief among these are issues of convenience – making/missing transfers, waiting for buses, walking distances required. Respondents view buses as being even more unpredictable than auto traffic, and, since cars leave them a sense of autonomy and options (e.g., postponing a trip because of conditions, or changing routes) they prefer to take their chances behind the wheel than leave the driving to others.

Respondents reason that people only ride the bus if they have no other choice. That means, poor people ride the bus. Although a few people spoke of this perception as an unfortunate belief, it was clear that most respondents actually shared it. Unlike the affordability of

*“I remember it used to be bumper to bumper in my commute from North Hollywood to Canoga Park and then they opened up the Orange Line, which pretty much just goes parallel to the freeway I take. And a lot of traffic disappeared and it stay disappeared. And now, if I leave at 7, I've got about 20 minutes to half an hour commute whereas it was getting up there 45 minutes before they opened it, so, a marked difference.” -- Reuben, Los Angeles*

*“It’s just two words: convenience and affordability. If the solution is convenient and at the right price, I think people will adopt it.” -- Nicholas, Los Angeles*

housing, where shared experience helps people bridge class divisions, bus ridership cues people to think of race and class, and so triggers existing (and unhelpful) perspectives on class and racial divisions.

By contrast, new high speed rail lines evoke values of efficiency, innovation and the future. Especially for younger respondents, increases in rail service are viewed as both highly desirable and inevitable. This approval does not depend on whether the respondent envisions him or herself actually riding the train. Enough progress has been achieved in expanding rail service so that all of these respondents take it as a given that people will use the line, and that, for themselves as drivers, this will reduce traffic pressure.

In Modesto, there was strong interest in rail service that would connect the Valley to BART. Respondents see this as vital to the area’s economic development, and especially in alleviating the crisis in abandoned or foreclosed properties. Respondents in the Central Valley also see opportunity in development of rail as building a distinct Central Valley hub defined in its own right, not in relation to the Bay area. This was linked to the need for improved air travel service, and to the economic future of the Valley.

There are also doubts about the efficacy of rail, if considered as replacing automobiles. Limitations of parking near transit stations were mentioned by several respondents, as was the concern about getting from the destination station to the actual destination: if a bus is needed to complete the journey, it raises concerns that buses are stuck in the same traffic that cars are in, and so lose the advantage over driving a car.

**Recommendation** Talk about transportation, not transit. Transportation includes cars and walking, buses and bicycles, trucks and trains. Evoke values of convenience, choice, reliability and efficiency (i.e., not wasting time and money.)

## Government and the Region

*"I've done some work with (my State Representative.) That was one person who was extremely aggressive and really, really wanted to get things done. Any organization, you're going to have the good guys out there that are good at listening, and they're spending their days with the people and giving it everything they've got. And you're going to have the not so great and the ones that are just out for their own selfish interests. It's like any other organization. The government is not immune to corruption or selfishness or greed or anything you say so. I don't think that we can put our finger on any one particular problem. It's just that it's—" CJ (I) Los Angeles*

*Stella (R):-- a problem.*

*CJ: It's a human problem. It's like any other."*

*"I agree with what she just said, too. Yeah." Deziree (D)*

*Stella:"It's called politics."*

These groups reflected similar findings elsewhere about voter distrust of government. There is the ideological divide, between those who reason that government is a threat to individual liberty and those who reason that government protects our rights. There is the political divide, between those who oppose taxes and government spending and those who support policies that benefit the community as a whole. These divisions were expressed throughout the discussions in responses to statements attributed to elected officials ("talking out of both sides of his mouth") and in considering the appropriate role of government in land use decisions.

But across these divides, respondents agree that government decisions are often unfair, reflecting narrow special interests. In transportation decisions, this is applied to oil and auto interests, LA taxi cabs opposed to airport transit, and local economic interests of elected officials. In transportation and in other types of decisions, voters share the perception that government is inefficient, and so are skeptical that government will "get things done" or "finish what they start."

When asked if local elected officials should be working together on issues of transportation, respondents across a range of political beliefs agree that they should. Because transportation cuts across jurisdiction, it seems common sense that planning must also be regional. Doubts are expressed about the wisdom, willingness, or effectiveness of local elected officials actually to do this.

**Recommendation:** Emphasize the importance of public participation, through communications targeted to elected officials that make it clear voters believe local officials have an obligation to be involved in cross-boundary planning, and want to see that they are doing so. A winning message for local officials is some variation on this: "To serve the interests of residents of this town, we have to work with neighboring communities to meet our shared and our local needs."

However, this is not an endorsement of regional planning in general. The presumption is that local elected officials should act on behalf of their own constituents' interests, and that local development decisions are and should be *local* decisions. Because of the broad support discussed above for development that reduces the necessity of travel, and for better use and re-use of existing places, this perspective leads respondents to support better transportation planning, including development of rail.

*“If cities work together, how can there be a downside?” - Reuben, Los Angeles*

It is widely acknowledged that transportation investments spur private investment, and specifically that investment in rail creates a market for development of homes and businesses. This means that there is a vital role for government, supported to some degree across political and ideological divides: make investments in rail infrastructure to create opportunity for local development.

*“In all of these individual little cities they have their own identity and they're proud of it and they want to keep it. They don't want to think about being swallowed up into the nucleus known as Modesto or the San Jose area. They don't want to do that. They want to keep their own, so they're going to fight and I don't...I don't see them working together for that reason alone. Because they are going to want to keep their own identity and it's going to have to...you're going to have to compromise.” - Denia, Modesto*

In Modesto in particular, respondents express belief that the Central Valley's interests are under-represented in State government decisions, and that attraction of State and Federal investment to the region is an obligation of local elected officials. This failure is partially attributed to the poor qualification of Modesto's elected representatives. A contrast was made between Modesto with a history of no planning and poor planning, and Turlock, where public decisions about land use are being and have been made to benefit the community as a whole.

Respondents are skeptical about the efficiency and accountability of government. Transportation projects are cited that have been under discussion for decades, and are perceived to take too long to accomplish and to go too far over budget. Because of the expectation that special interests dominate decisions and prevent positive decisions, voters believe that “the people” are not being listened to. One supporter of the recent rail tax in Los Angeles wondered why she hadn't seen any progress in the 18 months since her vote.

**Recommendation:** Keep voters informed on progress, process, and public opportunities. Maintain independent and highly visible status reports on projects or opportunities of interest, and create perception among targets that voters expect results.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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- Be explicit about the current system's costs to business, using business people as messengers talking about their own experience and the general economic impact. Use this as a set-up for discussion of economic opportunity through more transportation choices.
- Define the environmental benefits of reduced reliance on automobiles in terms of individual health and especially clean air. Talk about air pollution, not carbon emissions. Do not talk about independence from foreign fuels or resource depletion, as these lead to car technologies and US fuel sources.
- Evoke the costs to mental health indirectly, through frequent use of trigger words including stress, frustration, pressure, congestion, maddening, wasted time, et al. (all of which can be well applied to economic and political topics as easily as to traffic.)
- Do not define reduced auto use primarily as a solution to a problem, but as a direct benefit: more options for getting from point A to B. Citizens will still have their cars, but may not always choose to use them.
- Talk about transportation, not transit. Transportation includes cars and walking, buses and bicycles, trucks and trains. Evoke values of convenience, choice, reliability and efficiency (i.e., not wasting time and money.)
- Inoculate against comparisons to "back east" or "the Bay Area" by frequent mention of specific local routes and places, and discuss increased use of transit in terms that clearly include combinations of cars and other transportation modes.
- Talk about increasing the supply of homes people can afford, applying the same values of convenience, and choice, as well as economic opportunity. When raising issues of class, talk in terms of a housing market that meets the full range of needs, and in terms of job creation – not in terms of increased investment in public transit.
- Talk about creating jobs closer to where people live. This reverses the standard advocacy proposition that we need homes closer to jobs. Evoke and acknowledge opportunities for live/work arrangements, increased telecommuting and development of local employment. This is a lead-in for discussion of building neighborhoods and communities that are attractive and convenient, make more efficient use of land, and add to the local economy.
- Be explicit about re-use of abandoned or under-used properties, including downtown revitalizations. Be specific about what routes, corridors, and properties represent opportunity.
- Start from the perspective of local communities, local development and local economic opportunity. Talk about transportation choices and opportunities as part of this broader topic. This puts regional transportation planning far down in the information hierarchy, as a means toward clearly defined ends. Talk about what kinds of communities we can build, and how we can spur private investment.
- Emphasize the importance of public participation, through communications targeted to elected officials that make it clear voters believe local officials have an obligation to be involved in cross-boundary planning, and want to see that they are doing so. A winning message for local officials is some variation on this: "To serve the interests of residents of this town, we have to work with neighboring communities to meet our shared and our local needs."
- Keep voters informed on progress, process, and public opportunities. Maintain independent and highly visible status reports on projects or opportunities of interest, and create perception among targets that voters expect results.
- Localize the issue, and create perception among targets that their constituents understand the issue in terms of building and improving their town. Stress public participation in and ownership of key decisions, making regional transportation planning subordinate to the 'home town interest.'

## **Respondents**

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Fifty-two people participated, 27 men and 25 women. All respondents vote, and follow the news.

Thirty-one report they use public transportation “sometimes” or “often”.

Respondents in Orange County included residents of Laguna, Whittier, Costa mesa, Long Beach, San Pedro, Fullerton, Santa Ana, Anaheim, Anaheim Hills, Fountain Valley, Westminster, Huntington Beach, and Irvine. Respondents in Los Angeles reside in ten different zip codes.

Political preference:

Democrat – 20

Republican – 18

Independent – 14