

Beach Traffic – Questions & Answers

The Issue

Q: What is the problem?

A: The volume of traffic going over Highway 17 exceeds the capacity of the roadway. Traffic congestion on Highway 17, and other roadways, has historically been an issue for the Town during peak commute periods and during the summer months (“Beach Traffic”). However, population is increasing in the South Bay and surrounding areas and the corresponding increase in vehicular use have exacerbated these historic traffic patterns to the frustrating levels we face today.

Q: Why doesn’t traffic stay on the freeway?

A: In addition to the increases in vehicular use, the creation and mass adoption of mapping applications is directing vehicles to local streets never intended for highway/arterial overflow traffic. To avoid the congestion on the freeway, the mapping applications suggest using local roadways which creates the local congestion. The congestion compounds as the bigger local streets get congested and the mapping applications then further direct drivers to smaller and smaller streets.

Q: Does the Town understand that the traffic impacts the quality of life for local residents?

A: Yes. Town staff fully appreciates, and experiences alongside our community, the challenge of beach and other traffic. Town staff is a collaboration of public sector professionals with deep knowledge of the community who strive to alleviate problems in Town as they arise. As residents provide their concerns and insights, staff evaluates each concern carefully to determine if suggestions are legal, feasible, and do not create unintended consequences elsewhere. Too often, what seems like a viable suggestion simply makes the situation worse somewhere else in Los Gatos.

Town Actions

Q: In the past, the Town has closed South Santa Cruz Avenue at Wood Road. Why isn’t that happening this year?

A: As with many efforts to manage the traffic, changes in one area often shift the impact to another part of Town. This is exactly what happened with the closure at Wood Road. Residents on the east side of Los Gatos Boulevard in the area of Kennedy Road were impacted as a result. In addition, the closure created a barrier at Highway 9, making driving to downtown to visit local businesses very difficult.

Q: Can the Town post signage on the freeways advising drivers to stay on the freeway?

A: Yes, this has been suggested by residents and the Council and is now in place, with two locations on Highway 85 and one location on Highway 17 approaching Los Gatos.

Q: Will the Town be restricting turns into the Almond Grove area on Tait, Massol, and Ridgecrest?

A: Past resident feedback indicates that some Almond Grove residents like this idea and some residents do not. In 2018 we will try some weekends without restrictions and will follow up later in the summer with changes so residents can experience both situations. Construction in the Almond Grove will also impact the use of the roads for a part of the summer.

Q: Why can't the Town just ask the mapping applications to not show cut through routes?

A: The Town, similar to many jurisdictions, has asked for this consideration and in some instances has received it. Each mapping application has its own mapping model and algorithm, but the business model for each firm is in gaining customers by providing information on travel routes. If one application did not do it, another may attempt to in order to gain a competitive advantage.

Q: What are the mapping applications that show cut through routes?

A: The major applications are Waze, Google Maps, Tom Tom, Inrix, and Apple Maps.

Q: Can the Town limit traffic to local traffic only?

A: "Local Traffic Only" signage is advisory only and not enforceable by the Los Gatos Monte Sereno Police Department. The mapping applications do not recognize this signage in their applications, making the effort ineffective.

Q: I have heard that other cities like Los Altos had success with "Local Traffic Only," why are we different?

A: In reviewing the work in Los Altos with that city's staff, it appears that effort was done on a trial basis with Waze and showed promise initially but then fell apart as the applications adjusted.

Q: Can the Police Department increase enforcement of traffic laws?

A: The Police Officers that are on duty have specific responsibilities, some of which include enforcing traffic. At times, heavy calls for service impact the ability of Officers to provide traffic enforcement. Much of the time not spent on specific calls for service is committed to traffic enforcement.

Q: When officers are available, can't they just control an intersection to move the traffic through?

A: Controlling an intersection often takes two officers, about a third of the force on duty. But often even with that, the congestion is such that there is nowhere to move the vehicles. Officers are paying attention to vehicles blocking intersections and will be citing violators.

Q: What if I see another driver violating the rules of the road?

A: Violations must be observed in person by an officer in order for a citation to be issued.

Residents can report traffic concerns to the Town's Beach Traffic Reporting Line at beachtraffic@losgatosca.gov or by phone to 408-354-6810. A staff member will respond to calls and emails.

Other Ideas

Q: Can the Town close the onramp at Highway 9 or the off-ramp at Lark Ave?

A: No. The Town does not have the authority to close freeway or highway ramps or road segments. Those are under the purview of Caltrans. The Town has asked about the potential for those closures in the past and Caltrans has said they will not consider it.

Q: If the Town could do so, would closing the Highway 17 off-ramp at Lark Ave help?

A: Much of the cut through traffic is entering the Town from smaller streets and not from these freeway exits. This creates a challenge as each time traffic is impacted on those streets, the mapping programs derive an alternate route. Analysis of the traffic patterns in Town demonstrate this as traffic builds. Specifically, as one area gets impacted, the mapping programs incorporate a new route. In the early part of the traffic buildup, this results in some relief on the road that was first impacted. As volumes build, this changes, and ultimately all routes become impacted.

Q: Can the Town close roads and allow only residents access?

A: No. California Vehicle Code Section 21101.6 prohibits this approach.

Q: Can the Town close roads for safety reasons?

A: The Police Chief can close roads for safety only in the most extreme circumstances. Where passage on a roadway is possible, including the use of oncoming travel lanes for emergency vehicles, the roadway may still be safe. Our public safety Officers have deep knowledge of the Town and are constantly adjusting their response deployment models to adapt to any changes in their operational environment.

Q: Why doesn't the Town close more roads?

A: As previously stated road closures can only occur under extreme circumstances. In addition to the need for an evaluation on safety, closing one road most often creates unintended consequences on other adjacent or nearby roads as drivers and the applications guiding them seek alternatives.

Q: Can the Town charge tolls on local roads?

A: No. The State regulates the charging of tolls and tolls are not allowed on local streets and roads.

The Future

Q: Wouldn't widening Highway 17 solve the problem?

A: The Town's General Plan identifies the widening of Highway 17 as something the Town does not want. The Town is currently updating the General Plan and this may be part of the decision making. Town staff is also looking at opportunities to improve Highway 17 on and offramps to aid in the merging of vehicles. Vehicle merges create slowdowns and could help with the freeway traffic.

Q: What can the residents do?

A: Residents may wish to consider adjusting vehicular transportation through Town earlier in the morning or later in the evening on weekends. On mild summer days, walking and biking may be a way to enjoy the beautiful trails and bike paths in Town and to accomplish errands, dine in Town, shop, or meet with friends and family.

Q: What will the future hold for the roundabout on South Santa Cruz Avenue at Wood Road where the closure has been in past years?

A: The Town continues to pursue the construction of the roundabout through early design and permitting discussions with Caltrans. At a minimum this will provide a gateway into Town and act as a traffic calming measure for vehicles exiting Highway 17. The design will also keep the options open for more streamlined closures in the future, should the Town Council wish to do so. Once the design for this project is complete, staff will discuss cost and schedule with the Council for decisions on the next steps.