

# Improving Mobility Through the Congestion Management Program: The Ventura County, California, Experience

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Since 1990, California has required the preparation of a congestion management program (CMP) in urbanized counties. While the requirements of the CMP are not the same as those for the congestion management system (CMS) required through the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act, there are many similarities, not the least of which is that both seek the goal of funding and implementing projects and programs based upon a comprehensive and multimodal evaluation of the transportation landscape. Over the past 4 years, Ventura County, California, has used the CMP process to develop and put in place a number of transportation planning and transit service improvement programs. Ventura County's successes may be instructive to others wrestling with the federal CMS requirements.

With the passage of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) in 1991, transportation professionals across the country were introduced to the notion of a congestion management system. Its purpose, as stated in ISTEA, was to "provide for effective management of new and existing facilities through the use of travel demand reduction and operational management strategies."

It is commonly said that the congestion management system was modeled after California's Congestion Management Program (CMP). While this is sometimes debated, ISTEA's recognition and willingness to accept existing programs (the so-called California clause) suggest this idea has merit. Regardless, California's experiences with its Congestion Management Program can provide valuable information to other regions and states as they grapple with their own congestion management systems.

The ensuing discussion summarizes the efforts of Ventura County, with a population of 700,000, to develop, adopt, and implement its CMP. In addition, we describe some of the new programs and services in Ventura County that, while not part of the CMP itself, were initiated as a result of its development and adoption. This paper's focus on the CMP is not meant to suggest this effort occurs in a vacuum. It does not. The CMP is one of many transportation planning and programming efforts and is "synergistically" related to ongoing air quality and land-use planning efforts in Ventura County.

## DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROGRAM

In Ventura County, as in most urban counties in California, we have adopted our second CMP and have begun development of our third. Each of these efforts has clearly illustrated the fact that *how* the CMP is developed is almost as important as the policies and programs it contains. This was especially the case with the initial CMP.

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In 1990, when it was first described to policy makers in Ventura County, the CMP was considered at best another annoying and time-consuming requirement and at worst a threatening loss of local control that should be resisted at every opportunity. Using an active and inclusive CMP development process, the CMP proved to be neither.

For the CMP to be effective, local governments must directly or indirectly implement a number of programs and policies. Thus, they must be made "partners" in the process and allowed to help fashion a CMP that complements and, in some cases, improves local plans and programs. Similarly, transit providers and the air quality agency must also be given the opportunity to help create a CMP that furthers their goals.

All of these interests were accommodated through the creation of three core advisory groups that guided the development of specific portions of the CMP. These working groups were directed toward roadway, land use, and transit and transportation demand management issues. Their participation helped establish the basis for a monitoring and implementation process that was simple, inexpensive, and effective. In short, they dispelled for the policy makers the notion that the CMP was a time-consuming and expensive requirement.

In addition to these working groups, a policy committee was formed that consisted of a combination of elected officials and local government managers, as well as private-sector (business and development) representatives and members of local environmental groups. This committee was instrumental in establishing the goals and objectives of the CMP as well as developing the transportation demand management ordinance requirements (an issue elevated in importance by concurrent air quality planning efforts and the California recession). Perhaps most importantly, this committee provided the CMA board members with a feeling that the direction and objectives of the CMP were reasonable and supported by a broad segment of the community. In essence, the CMP would not compromise local land-use control, nor would it completely open or completely shut the door on development in the county.

Finally, in addition to these committees, the general public was encouraged to participate in the process through a number of special community meetings and presentations before every city council and the county board of supervisors. All of these efforts resulted in the relatively smooth adoption of a CMP drafted and implemented largely by the Ventura County Transportation Commission's small staff, with no perceived contribution to the "bureaucracy."

## LEVEL OF SERVICE STANDARDS

While the establishment and monitoring of level of service (LOS) standards were a new (and therefore frightening) prospect for many coun-

ties, they were well understood in Ventura County. Most local agencies had adopted LOS standards and were familiar with their meaning and use. The central debate was rightly placed on the standard itself and the CMA elected to adopt the statutory minimum—LOS E, or F where it currently existed. While many, if not a majority, of the CMA board members preferred LOS D, the newness of the program and its as yet unknown impacts led them to adopt the statutory minimum.

Once the LOS E policy had been decided upon, the focus switched to establishing the monitoring procedures, including the methodology for calculating LOS. Striking a balance between a desire to monitor the entire system and a desire to control the costs of monitoring, the CMA identified key highway segments, interchanges, and arterial intersections that required monitoring on an annual or biennial basis, depending upon their observed LOS.

Although the majority of the local agencies were already monitoring LOS, they had differing LOS calculation methodologies in place. Virtually all of them were based upon the intersection capacity utilization (ICU) method. This planning-oriented approach (as opposed to an operational one) was well suited to the CMP, where the standards serve primarily as “triggers” to alert the CMA and local agencies to problems requiring additional analysis. To further standardize the methodology, the CMA and local agencies studied the ICU methodology and collected field data to support development of standardized variables (such as lost time, lane capacity, phasing, etc.) to ensure consistent calculations across the county. This methodology eliminated the finger pointing that often occurred between technical staffs of adjacent jurisdictions.

In keeping with the desire for flexibility in the CMP process, the uniform LOS calculation methodology was not mandated in all cases. Local agencies are given the opportunity to submit documentation supporting a change in methodology where they deem it more appropriate. Such documentation is then reviewed by the CMA’s standing technical committee.

It is important to note that CMP statute requires a local agency to prepare a deficiency plan when a location within its jurisdiction falls below the adopted LOS standard. The purpose of the plan is to identify the cause of the problem, and implement either the improvements necessary to correct the problem or improvements in system LOS and air quality. In response, the CMA established a policy of local agency cooperation and assignment of costs on a fair-share basis as the guideposts in the development of deficiency plans in the county. Although no deficiency plans have yet been prepared in the county, the cooperative process outlined in the CMP has served as a model for negotiations between local jurisdictions regarding needed transportation improvements and cost distributions.

Ventura County’s experience with the CMP LOS standards has, in general, been favorable. When we began the process, the only certainty was that a local jurisdiction would lose its new gas tax funds if it did not meet the adopted standard. Four years later, we have set up a process to direct surface transportation funds to congested areas; we have laid the foundation for a cooperative process for resolving interjurisdictional disputes; and we have developed and used a framework for directing our limited transportation funding toward our most congested locations.

## TRANSIT STANDARDS

As was the case for most counties in the state, the development and adoption of transit standards proved to be a difficult and delicate task. This arose largely from—unlike with roadway LOS—the lack

of a direct link between the provision of transit services and the new gas tax funds. In California, the two primary funding sources for transit are the Transportation Development Act (TDA) and FTA Section 9 funds. In addition, most counties within the larger metropolitan areas have passed sales tax measures that include substantial funding for transit services. Unfortunately, to date, Ventura County has not passed a sales tax for transportation purposes. As mentioned before, the Ventura County Transportation Commission (VCTC) serves as the county’s CMA. In addition to the CMA function, the VCTC is responsible for allocating TDA funds and programming FTA Section 9 as well as STP and congestion mitigation and air quality (CMAQ) improvement funds in the county.

So while there is no direct legal link between the CMP and transit funding, in Ventura County there is a link between the CMA and transit funding. This link has provided the VCTC the opportunity, as the CMA, to establish transit “standards” and then follow through on programs designed to meet them.

The starting point in developing the transit standards for the CMP was a countywide transit services study to identify service needs and develop transit standards for the CMP. Through this effort, the CMA was able to identify a number of services that could be reasonably implemented and that would meet well-documented needs in the county. These services were classified into the CMP categories of routing, frequency, and coordination. As such, the transit standards in Ventura County’s CMP were written with the goal of meeting identified needs as opposed to the more traditional service-oriented goal (i.e., maximum load factors, on-time performance, fare box recovery, etc.). Sample CMP standards include the following:

- A 30-minute (peak) and a 60-minute (off-peak) headway on commuter services along the Route 101 corridor;
- Establishment of a centralized transit information center (to provide scheduling and other information for all fixed-route transit providers, both public and private, in the county);
- Creation of a transit operators committee to facilitate better communication and coordination between different transit service providers; and
- Implementation of a countywide transit pass program.

As with the roadway projects mentioned earlier, the implementation of services to meet many of the CMP transit standards benefited from the timing of ISTEA and the newly available STP and CMAQ funds. The CMA was in a position to make funds available for these new services and, to its credit, moved quickly to make these programs a reality. Over the past year alone, the county has seen the initiation of four new commuter and intercity bus services (VISTA), a countywide transit pass, a coordinated transit marketing program, and a number of fare transfer agreements.

In concert, all of these programs have exponentially increased transit’s visibility and utility and have for the first time in Ventura County provided a reasonable transit alternative to the automobile. While it may be too strong a statement to say these programs would have never been implemented had it not been for the CMP, it is very fair to say that without the CMP these services would not have become a reality in Ventura County until well into the next century.

## LAND USE IMPACT PROGRAM

One of the primary purposes of the CMP was to bring land use and transportation planning closer together. This was to be accom-

plished in large part through a program to analyze the effect local land use decisions have on the adopted roadway network and transit service standards. The CMA elected to develop a two-tiered process that included a countywide impact analysis program and guidelines for local land use impact programs.

### Countywide Program

The CMA is responsible for implementing the countywide land use impact program, which has two elements. The first is an analysis of the cumulative impact of all existing and anticipated development in Ventura County. This analysis is performed at a minimum on a biennial basis as part of the CMP update. The analysis is used to identify and prioritize projects for the capital improvement program portion of the CMP. The information is also used to shape the policies and programs included in the CMP and is passed on to the local agencies so that they may begin to address potential future congestion problems within their communities.

The second element of the program is directed toward the evaluation of large individual projects that might affect the CMP roadway and transit systems. To avoid duplication, this program is limited to evaluation of development projects that were not included in the previous cumulative analysis *and* that generate either 100 additional or 200 new peak-hour trips. The analysis focuses on traffic volumes and distributions as well as potential system impacts. The findings are forwarded to the lead agency for its use as it considers transportation and air quality impacts associated with the project. If the CMA is provided the project information early enough in the process, the CMA's analysis can be used in defining the traffic study work scope.

### Local Programs

CMP law in California also requires local adoption and implementation of land use impact programs. In Ventura County, the CMA's determination of consistency and compatibility is based upon the following adopted review criteria:

- Has the program been formally adopted?
- Is the threshold at which the traffic impact assessment is required at least as strict as that in the countywide program?

- Does the program set out procedures for analyzing the impacts of proposed land use on, at a minimum, that portion of the CMP network within the project's impact area?

- If the analysis is based on use of a local traffic model, is the model consistent with the countywide traffic model?

- Does it include or require an estimate of the costs of providing the improvements needed to maintain, at a minimum, the CMP LOS standards on the CMP network?

In Ventura County, the CMP land use impact program requirements have had two direct and very beneficial effects. First, they accelerated if not generated, the effort to develop a countywide traffic model (just recently completed) that will significantly improve traffic impact analyses and further the coordination between transportation, land-use, and air quality planning efforts in Ventura County. And second, they have led local communities to take a *serious* look at impacts beyond their jurisdiction. In addition, the program has had the indirect effect of hastening the development of "reciprocal traffic agreements" between the cities and the county, as well as the possible development of a countywide traffic impact fee.

### CONCLUSION

Ventura County's experience with the CMP has been very positive. The policy and technical work done in the area of traffic level of service has been educational for policy makers and has, in concert with the land use impact program, established a framework for assessing intercity transportation impacts and "negotiating" the implementation of mitigation measures. The requirements for transit service standards led directly to a systematic and comprehensive study of transit needs and, ultimately, the selection and implementation of significant service improvements. In concert with other transportation planning programs, the CMP has helped Ventura County toward the goal of funding and implementing projects and programs based upon a multimodal evaluation of the transportation landscape.

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