

# Pasadena Ushers In Era Of VMT Metrics

BY JOSH STEPHENS

Perhaps fittingly, one of the state's oldest, stateliest cities will be the first to institute one of the most sophisticated advances in planning tools since the slide rule. Not long ago, the City of Pasadena implemented metrics that measure projects' impacts under the California Environmental Quality Act in terms of vehicle miles traveled rather than level of service.

Pasadena is not only the first city in the state to adopt VMT metrics but may also be the first in the nation.

Pasadena's switch both responds to and precedes the adoption of Senate Bill 743. Passed in 2013 as an amendment to the California Environmental Quality Act, [SB 743](#) will require cities to evaluate traffic impacts according to vehicle miles traveled, not to traditional level-of-service thresholds.

Those thresholds take a narrow view of mobility, measuring only the flow of vehicular traffic. This switch means that impacts need not be mitigated only by improving vehicular flow but also by almost any other program or mode – including public transit, cycling, pedestrian improvements, and many other methods.

SB 743 complements 2008's Senate Bill 375, which encourages dense development and alternative transportation in the effort to curb greenhouse gas emissions. Many planners considered CEQA ironically hostile to SB 375's goals in part because of its reliance on VMT. Projects that increased congestion at poorly rated intersections were considered to have significant negative impacts.

The Office of Planning and Research recently released draft guidelines for VMT metrics, with a final draft expected later this year. Pasadena, however, is well ahead of most of its peers.

In 2004, Pasadena adopted a development plan that favors further density in the city's already built-up urban core. In 2008, the city began the process of updating the land use and mobility elements of its general plan. Building on the 2004 development plan, the general plan update all but necessitated the adoption of VMT metrics (allowed, but not necessarily encouraged, under CEQA at the time), so city planners drafted theirs from scratch, years before SB 743 was drafted.

The Pasadena City Council voted to adopt the metrics in November, and they were implemented at the beginning of this year. The metrics will soon be integrated into the entire general plan and its environmental impact report.

"They realized that...if we were going to transform our streets, we needed to measure whether a project is good or bad, figure out how to put the appropriate design into the project," said Pasadena Planning Director Vince Bertoni. "We had to measure traffic differently."

The LOS approach, born of 1950s-era management approaches, set up the paradoxical situation in which high-density development was often pushed away from city centers – where multiple transportation options are available – and out to urban fringes, where intersections are less congested even if they end up generating more and longer car trips.

"Over-reliance on level of service as the only indicator of success in our transportation systems is one of the biggest obstacles to infill development," said Jeffery Tumlin, principal and director of strategy at Nelson-Nygaard.

In many ways, Pasadena is the perfect city to usher in California's next chapter in smart growth. It is a metropolis in miniature, with a dense, mixed-use downtown, distinct thoroughfares, and stately suburban-style neighborhoods on its edges. The Old Pasadena commercial district instituted innovative parking reforms decades ago, and the city has embraced the Gold Line light rail.

"We're...essentially down to nothing but infill development," said Fred Dock, Pasadena's director of transportation.

VMT therefore complements the direction in which Pasadena was already headed, even with the inconveniences of LOS metrics.

"We don't widen the roads. We're managing congestion, we're managing traffic volumes, we're managing how signals operate," said Dock. "We're not able to add capacity in the sense that we would be able to mitigate a level-of-service impact."

Dock said that the inclusion of an impact fee will be crucial for the success of mitigation under the VMT metrics. Pasadena has used impact fees for amenities like

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parks for a decade. Dock said that impact fees can now be used for mitigation measures such as bike infrastructure and pedestrian plans and a host of other projects that can offset would-be VMT increases but would have been nearly meaningless under LOS metrics.

While embrace of VMT is a paradigm shift in the planning field, Pasadena may be an ideal proving ground, because the new metrics do not promise to have a significant impact on the city. They are expected to appear slowly, on a project-by-project basis.

“But what you’re going to see is...changes over time in terms of how people behave and move around,” Bertoni added. He said that buildings might get taller and a few surface parking lots might disappear.

No matter what guidelines OPR sends to the Natural Resources Agency in the coming months, Pasadena is almost bound to have an easier time adopting VMT metrics than many other California cities will.

“The learning curve in Pasadena isn’t going to be nearly as sharp as other places,” said Bertoni. “In other places, you’re going to have people who come to the table very leery of this and very cautious.”

Bertoni cited instances when community members, with no apparently connection to professional planning, arrived at meetings proactively asking the city to move off LOS and go to VMT. “And they know what it means!” he said.

Nonetheless, cities around the state are expected to take notice of Pasadena’s efforts. Bertoni said that he expects and welcomes inquires. “When you’re at the cutting edge like we are, that’s also part of your responsibility,” said Bertoni.

Other early adopters, including Oakland and San Francisco, are not expected to release their draft metrics for months.

“There’s a few cities that have been pioneering and gotten out in front of SB 743, which is helpful to us,” said Chris

Ganson, senior planner at the Governors Office of Planning and Research. “They’re developing these methods that can be examples for other cities.”

OPR is currently taking comments and working on the next draft of guidelines. Ganson said that the current draft has elicited “every flavor of response.”

However long it takes California’s other cities to become as comfortable with their VMT metrics as Pasadena is with its, Bertoni maintains that acceptance of VMT is

inevitable – not just in California, where it is mandated, but in places outside California too.

“This is where we are going not only as a city, as a region, as a country,” said Bertoni. ■

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Find OPR’s SB 743 Guidelines Discussion Draft [here](#).

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