

The worst freeway interchange in California is getting fixed... until the money runs out

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Traffic flows through the interchange of the 60 and 57 freeways in Diamond Bar on Wednesday, March 18, 2015. (Photo by Watchara Phomicinda/ San Gabriel Valley Tribune)

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DIAMOND BAR >> Construction of a \$260 million fix to the two-mile stretch where the congested 57/60 freeways converge begins in January, said transportation officials at Tuesday's kick off.

This stretch of mingled freeways, dangerous lane configurations and heavy truck traffic was ranked No. 1 for delays and truck accidents in California, and No. 8 in the nation by the American Transportation Research Institute. Caltrans ranked it in the top five most congested freeway interchanges in Los Angeles and Ventura counties.

In the last three years, 250 trucks were involved in accidents on this stretch of the freeways, said Rep. Ed Royce, R-Rowland Heights. Truck volume reaches 26,000 every day, a number that planners say will increase to 44,000 in 2035. Today, 356,000 vehicles travel through the convergence, costing drivers three hours of delays during peak hours.

Because the 60 Freeway carries trucks from the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach to warehouses in eastern Los Angeles and Riverside counties, as well as the entire United States, the project has attracted attention from Washington and local transit agencies worried about delays in goods movement.

City of Industry committed \$35 million for planning and construction, the Los Angeles County Transportation Authority (Metro), \$22.7 million, a federal Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) of \$10 million was awarded last year by the U.S. Department of Transportation.

The federal grant is so rare, the 57/60 was one of two Southern California projects to receive a TIGER grant last year.

"It is easier to get into Harvard than it is to get a TIGER grant. It is not a joke," said David Kim, associate administrator for policy and governmental affairs at the Federal Highway Administration. He spoke at the ground-breaking ceremony held on the freeways' westbound edge. Kim said the FHA granted 3 percent of its funding requests, while Harvard has a slightly higher acceptance rate.

Even after 15 years of planning and constant lobbying from Diamond Bar, City of Industry, Metro, Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) and labor groups, they rustled up about \$55 million, \$205 million short.

Still, construction can start because of a phased approach that includes multiple fixes centered on using bypass lanes and extra off- and on-ramp lanes to separate vehicles driving the 57 Freeway from those going west and east on the 60 Freeway.

The first phase adds a westbound on-ramp south of Grand Avenue, said John Ballas, city engineer for the City of Industry. A second phase, beginning in June 2016, will include the addition of an auxiliary lane to the southbound 57 on the north side of

Grand Avenue, reversing the squeeze of three lanes to two lanes that backs up traffic four hours each morning and afternoon at Sunset Crossing Road; it also provides an off-ramp to Grand Avenue. The next phase widens Grand Avenue and Golden Springs Drive, east of the merge. These phases are funded.

But the bulk of the project — which would add bypass roads on the 57 and 60 freeways and eliminate drivers weaving four to six lanes to cross over to the opposite freeway — has zero funding.

Ballas said momentum, plus the prestige from the TIGER grant, could nudge funding out of the federal transportation bill passed last week by the House, now headed to Senate and House conferences. Part of that \$325 billion bill includes \$725 million for freight and highway projects in the 2016 federal budget.

While the bill doesn't name this project, the freeway corridor is named on the primary freight network of the nation, he said.

Most likely, full funding must wait until after a new county transportation tax measure passes next November. Even then, the final phase may have to wait 10 to 20 years for funding, experts said.