

Love, Lies, and Transportation in LA, Again

An Updated Almanac in Honor of Mel Webber

BY CHARLES LAVE

This was originally published in ACCESS in 1994, after a lot of encouragement and pushing by Mel. He thought people ought to know these data, and he figured a casual presentation would be remembered longer. I'm sure he is still watching, so I'll dedicate this 2007 update to him.

IN THE PAST FEW YEARS ANGELINOS HAVE BEEN SHAKEN BY EARTHQUAKES and scorched by brush fires, sort of like lumps of tofu in a stir-fry wok. But we're tough, we can take it.

What does scare us, though, is suffocation. We're about to go down for the third time in the sea of media clichés that followed the last quake. One more mention of “California’s love affair with the car” and we’re goners. That’s not the local taste. If we wanted to fondle cars we’d be somewhere in Alabama.

But don’t Californians drive a lot? Compared to whom? Well, the folks in 38 states drive more miles per capita than we do. But aren’t Californians practically issued a driver’s license at birth? Not exactly: 46 states have more drivers per capita than we do. As to greenhouse gas contributions, 45 states use more gasoline and diesel per capita than we do. Ah, but what about public transit? Yes, we have it and we ride it. Forty-one states use transit less than we do. That’s all primary data, not hearsay from newspaper clippings.

So how did this love-affair story get started? I learned the inside history from a highly placed source. Once upon a time, a New York reporter came out here to learn about the horrors of Angelinos’ daily commute. *Seek and ye shall find*. Especially if you start with the conclusion and then search until you find a fact that supports it. Ignoring the ordinary, this reporter eventually found someone with a ninety-minute commute. He could now go home and write his story: “People in Los Angeles travel ninety minutes to get to work!”

It was not exactly a scientific sample. Suppose I were to visit New York, search for a long time, and find a smiling New Yorker. Would it be fair if I wrote a story accusing New Yorkers of being happy?

But those pesky government statistics even have something to say about that commuter fish-story. It turns out the average commute in LA is 29 minutes and the average commute in New York is five minutes longer: 34 minutes. That’s ten minutes a day Angelinos save on a round trip—extra time to fight brush fires, clear quake rubble, or hum a mantra.

So much for California’s fabled auto dependence. What phrase might take its place to fill the cliché-gap? Well, we do have a lot of hot tubs. Why don’t they write about California’s love affair with hot water? ♦

RANK	MOTOR FUEL PER PERSON (IN GALLONS)		LICENSED DRIVERS PER 1,000 PERSONS		VEHICLE MILES TRAVELED PER PERSON		PERCENTAGE OF WORKERS WHO TAKE TRANSIT TO WORK	
	1991	2004	1991	2004	1991	2004	1991	2004
1	360 NY	376 NY	558 AK	585 NY	5,962 NY	7,172 NY	25.50% NY	25.70% NY
2	370 HI	396 HI	569 NY	604 MN	7,054 AK	7,613 AK	10.30% IL	10.30% NJ
3	408 RI	411 RI	574 MN	634 IL	7,124 RI	7,701 HI	9.00% NJ	9.20% MA
4	429 MA	517 MA	603 UT	634 CA	7,174 HI	7,841 RI	8.50% MA	8.40% IL
5	461 PA	525 CA	610 LA	643 DE	7,297 PA	8,289 NV	8.40% MD	8.10% MD
6	463 IL	528 IL	616 HI	647 TX	7,401 IL	8,374 NJ	7.60% HI	6.00% HI
7	466 CT	541 WA	616 IN	647 MD	7,640 NJ	8,536 MA	6.60% PA	5.30% PA
8	480 CA	542 PA	617 CO	653 MS	7,761 MA	8,584 IL	5.10% CA	5.00% CA
9	489 NJ	579 CO	638 IL	656 GA	8,091 CT	8,711 PA	4.70% WA	5.00% WA
10	494 MD	581 OR	640 AZ	659 AZ	8,163 LA	8,974 WA	4.10% VA	4.00% OR
11	497 AK	582 FL	650 KY	662 UT	8,185 NV	9,022 CT	4.00% CT	3.90% CT
12	511 OH	582 MD	651 TX	663 NV	8,216 CO	9,164 CA	3.80% MN	3.80% VA
13	514 CO	593 UT	656 CA	667 NJ	8,236 IA	9,744 OH	3.50% OR	3.30% MN
14	514 NH	594 MI	661 MD	668 NM	8,492 CA	9,878 LA	3.10% LA	2.90% NV
15	514 UT	596 DE	664 IA	668 HI	8,502 OH	9,903 OR	3.00% CO	2.70% CO
16	517 FL	600 OH	665 PA	670 OH	8,508 MD	9,947 MD	2.90% GA	2.40% DE
17	519 LA	603 WI	671 NE	673 OK	8,547 FL	9,973 CO	2.70% NV	2.10% AZ
18	520 MI	608 NJ	671 ND	677 AR	8,695 UT	9,982 AZ	2.60% AK	2.00% GA
19	522 WI	610 CT	672 CT	677 ID	8,746 MI	10,170 NH	2.60% IN	2.00% UT
20	535 WA	616 NV	674 RI	678 IA	8,817 OR	10,218 MI	2.60% OH	2.00% WI
21	544 AZ	618 AZ	675 NC	680 PA	8,848 NE	10,272 TX	2.60% RI	1.90% FL
22	557 WV	629 ID	675 SC	681 KY	8,857 MN	10,337 UT	2.60% WI	1.90% LA
23	558 MN	637 WV	683 OH	685 VA	8,898 WV	10,572 ID	2.50% DE	1.90% OH
24	567 VA	644 NH	685 ID	686 RI	8,991 NH	10,574 VA	2.40% UT	1.90% TX
25	568 DE	645 KS	685 TN	697 CO	9,151 TX	10,664 KS	2.30% TX	1.80% AK
26	576 ME	651 NC	685 WI	702 LA	9,174 WI	10,675 IA	2.10% AZ	1.70% RI
27	579 NC	668 MN	687 MI	702 MI	9,247 AR	10,964 WI	2.10% FL	1.50% WY
28	581 TX	669 LA	696 GA	703 MO	9,256 WA	10,972 NE	2.10% MO	1.30% MO
29	586 OR	674 VT	696 WA	708 SC	9,293 KS	11,090 MN	2.00% ID	1.10% MI
30	593 KS	674 TX	699 NM	710 WI	9,314 AZ	11,183 WV	1.70% KY	1.10% SC
31	595 VT	680 ME	701 MA	712 WV	9,372 ND	11,201 DE	1.70% MI	1.10% WV
32	599 ID	688 VA	708 NV	717 NC	9,484 KY	11,228 NC	1.50% WY	1.00% IN
33	601 TN	692 TN	712 SD	720 TN	9,543 TN	11,292 FL	1.40% TN	1.00% KY
34	610 IN	724 IN	714 KS	724 KS	9,546 SD	11,348 ME	1.30% IA	1.00% NC
35	611 SC	728 OK	714 WV	724 MA	9,594 ME	11,395 SD	1.20% NE	0.90% IA
36	612 IA	737 NE	718 MT	725 IN	9,605 MS	11,414 KY	1.10% SC	0.90% NM
37	616 KY	745 GA	719 AL	726 WA	9,631 NC	11,497 AR	1.10% WV	0.80% ME
38	619 NE	748 MO	719 OK	728 ND	9,673 IN	11,657 IN	1.00% NM	0.80% VT
39	621 MS	753 AR	720 ME	731 OR	9,679 SC	11,803 SC	1.00% NC	0.70% ID
40	624 NV	755 AL	724 MO	731 SD	9,720 VA	11,971 ND	0.90% ME	0.60% AL
41	635 OK	760 IA	725 AR	736 AK	9,884 DE	11,989 MO	0.80% AL	0.60% MS
42	644 MO	764 NM	727 VT	748 ME	9,884 MO	12,022 TN	0.80% MS	0.60% NE
43	653 AL	771 KY	728 DE	751 WY	9,931 ID	12,091 MT	0.80% VT	0.60% ND
44	670 GA	780 MS	729 NJ	753 NE	10,290 MT	12,579 NM	0.70% KS	0.60% TN
45	673 NM	782 AK	730 FL	756 FL	10,353 VT	12,641 VT	0.70% NH	0.50% AR
46	687 AR	787 MT	740 VA	759 NH	10,497 AL	12,755 GA	0.60% MT	0.50% MT
47	696 MT	791 SC	741 WY	769 CT	10,784 OK	13,031 AL	0.60% ND	0.50% NH
48	702 SD	801 SD	743 MS	769 MT	10,835 NM	13,181 OK	0.60% OK	0.50% OK
49	709 ND	826 ND	767 NH	798 AL	11,023 GA	13,583 MS	0.50% AR	0.50% SD
50	1,016 WY	1,358 WY	812 OR	886 VT	13,039 WY	18,283 WY	0.30% SD	0.30% KS
AVERAGE	570	663	683	700	9,040	10,681	3.23%	2.88%
MEDIAN	572	648	685	699	9,163	10,669	2.20%	1.75%

Comparative state statistics, 1991 and 2004 (ranked by environmental desirability)

The original 1994 almanac showed that California was doing pretty well. The latest data show that it has even improved over the thirteen years between measurements. For fuel per capita: California was in eighth place in 1991; it's now in fifth place. For licenses per capita: California was in thirteenth place; it's now in fourth place. For VMT per capita: in 1994, California was in fourteenth place; it's now in twelfth place. The only statistic where California dropped was in transit use: it fell one place, from eighth to ninth.

Source: Highway Statistics 2005