

California dreaming: LA imagines life without cars

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But a surprise public response to a "car-mageddon" warning this month has fueled questions over whether -- shock, horror -- LA [motorists](#) could wean themselves off of four wheels.

A new law bolstering cyclists' rights has also added to debate, in a state which enjoys year-round sunshine and spectacular scenery, but where

smog haze regularly clouds views of the sparkling Pacific.

"You can suddenly hear people talking," said LA County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky after the closure of a key stretch of highway failed to produce the feared apocalyptic gridlock -- quite the contrary, the roads were eerily empty.

"You hear kids playing. People discovered something about themselves and Los Angeles auto culture that shocked them. Why can't we take some chunk of LA and shut it down to traffic on certain days or weekends, as they do in Italy?"

Before the closure of a 10-mile (16-kilometer) stretch of the 405 freeway at the northern end of the LA basin earlier this month, officials had blitzed the airwaves with warnings of "car-mageddon".

But in fact motorists who did venture out during the 53-hour closure found roads eerily empty, as Angelenos heeded the warnings in massive numbers -- producing what some called "carmaheaven."

The closure "demonstrated that Angelenos really can change their driving behavior if they're motivated to do so," said an opinion piece in the LA Times, noting that a similar thing happened during the 1984 Olympics in the city.

"It's not hard to get people out of their cars during extraordinary events; the tough thing is doing it on a daily basis," added the newspaper.



A new law bolstering cyclists' rights has added to a growing debate about car culture in Los Angeles, which enjoys year-round sunshine and spectacular scenery, but where smog haze regularly clouds views of the sparkling Pacific.

Critics say one reason that can't be done is LA' parlous public transport system: buses run even slower than cars, and the subway system is OK where it goes, but useless for most people simply due to the city's sprawl.

And walking has never been a real option, except for the shortest of trips, partly because in the summer it's too hot, sometimes for safety reasons, especially after dark.

One group who did take heart are [cyclists](#) -- who have long campaigned for more cycle paths, and who this week welcomed a new law passed this week by the the LA City Council to protect bicyclists from harassment by motorists.

The new law, which supporters say is tougher than anywhere else in the US, makes it a crime for drivers to threaten cyclists verbally or

physically, and lets victims sue without waiting for the city to press criminal charges.

"It's a groundbreaking move," said Andy Clarke, president of the League of American Bicyclists, while City lawmaker Bill Rosendahl, who championed the plan, said: "It's about time cyclists have rights."

Paul Tullis, who writes a blog for the Huffington Post, said car-mageddon had provided a unique opportunity.

"How about seizing the opportunity, when the memory of a virtually car-free Los Angeles is still fresh, to enact weekend traffic restrictions to make the region infinitely more enjoyable on the weekends?" he said.

"The picture of a virtually car-free Los Angeles could inspire some big changes, and the benefits seem significant enough to be worth trying different fixes to overcome various obstacles," he added.



Los Angeles' parlous public transport system -- buses run even slower than cars, and the subway system is useless due to the city's sprawl -- is one reason why it will be tough to wean the city's motorists off their four wheels.

But while car-mageddon has triggered debate, skeptics note that it will take more than a marketing campaign to change decades of car culture in America's second biggest city.

"Visitors to LA often express astonishment that Angelenos can tolerate the traffic, but to us it's as natural as Botox," said the LA Times' editorial writer.

"There are other choices: carpooling, biking, scootering, walking. And it's no secret what cities and countries need to do to encourage people to choose them. In Europe and Asia, such incentives are commonplace, and they work.

"Will any of these ideas fly politically in car-crazy LA? Don't hold your breath," it added.

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