

VMT – What is it and why does it matter?

“Vehicle miles traveled” (VMT) is a measure of driving.

- One vehicle driving one mile = 1 vehicle mile traveled, or 1 VMT
- One vehicle driving two miles or two vehicles each driving 1 mile = 2 VMT

VMT helps quantify the impacts of driving on households, society, and the environment:

- **Affordability** - Driving a car is very expensive! Purchasing, maintaining, and buying gas for cars is the largest household expense after housing, especially for low-income families. Reducing driving by 20% can save households as much as \$2700 per year¹.
- **Safety** - Places with more driving experience excessive crashes, serious injuries, and deaths. Over 4,400 people died on California roadways in 2022.
- **Air and climate pollution** - Driving increases air pollution like particulates and smog that cause cancer, asthma, and respiratory disease, as well as climate-warming emissions that supercharge wildfires, floods, and extreme heat.

Reducing how much people have to drive each day has many benefits for affordability, safety, and health².

What does California law require related to VMT?

SB 375 (2008) requires that regional agencies plan for housing, job growth, and transportation projects across a region to reduce dependence on driving and GHG emissions.

SB 743 (2013) requires that land use and transportation projects measure how much new driving will be generated or reduced by a project under CEQA. Project sponsors have discretion to decide how much new VMT is “significant” and what VMT mitigation solutions are “feasible”.

These are critical policies that move the state toward more sustainable growth. We need to ensure we implement them to improve people’s lives, communities, and affordability.

Highway expansion increases driving and worsens congestion.

Expanding roads and highways by adding lanes attracts new driving that will fill the new lanes with traffic³.

This increase in driving is called “induced travel” or “induced VMT.” Induced travel is shown to erase any temporary congestion relief when the new lanes open.

Plus, safety and congestion are often much worse during many years of construction – [Hella construction on Sacramento’s Hwy. 50 promises little long-term relief, SacBee](#).⁴

Congestion levels bounce back within 5 to 10 years on average, and sometimes sooner. The expanded Sepulveda Pass in LA had slower travel times on opening day – [More Is Less on L.A.’s I-405, UCLA Luskin Center](#).



¹ [Smarter MODES Calculator: Smarter Mobility Options for Decarbonization, Equity, and Safety - RMI](#)

² [What California Gains from Reducing Car Dependence](#), National Center for Sustainable Transportation

³ [Increasing Highway Capacity Induces More Auto Travel](#), UC Davis Institute for Transportation Studies

⁴ Photo Credit - Lezlie Sterling, SacBee

Better quality of life with public transit, active transportation, and infill housing⁵

These solutions reduce the need for driving and transportation costs to households in all community types and are more cost-effective solutions than expanding roadways.



- **In rural communities** we can revitalize main streets and downtowns to make them walkable; improve flexible transit, especially for non-drivers; increase housing within town centers and near jobs.

- **In suburban communities** we can increase the jobs/housing fit by bringing more jobs that don't add pollution to residential areas; increase density around transit; increase walkability in neighborhoods to parks, schools, shopping; reduce traffic stress for people walking and biking.

- **In urban communities** we can increase transit frequency; get buses out of traffic with bus lanes; modernize transit and improve customer experience; increase affordable housing near jobs and transit.

VMT mitigation doesn't stop highway projects or make them overly expensive

VMT mitigation solutions like public transit, active transportation, transportation demand management, tolling, and infill housing are a marginal additional cost on top of a very expensive highway expansion project.

- The State Route 99 Six-Lane expansion project in Tulare County will cost over \$240 million, yet only \$4.7 million is proposed for VMT mitigation, *less than 2% of the total project cost*.
- The Delano to Pixley expansion project of SR 99 will cost \$110 million and proposes VMT mitigation that costs *less than \$3.5 million, or 3% of total project cost*.

In some cases, investments are counted as mitigation that are funded by CA Climate Investment Programs:

- The I-680 Express Lane expansion project is counting new hydrogen-fueled express bus program toward the project's VMT mitigation, and paying for it with non-highway funds. The \$121.5 million for the hydrogen bus is funded entirely by Transit & Intercity Rail Capital grants.



Establishing a statewide VMT mitigation bank, as proposed in the current Climate-Aligned Housing trailer bill, will provide project sponsors the option to contribute VMT mitigation funds toward transit-oriented affordable housing as a viable mitigation solution that will also help solve our housing crisis.

We will achieve greater benefits to travel, affordability, air quality, climate, and quality of life by funding the mitigation solutions instead of the highway project. The highway expansion project itself is the wrong solution.

WIDENING WORSENS TRAFFIC

⁵ Photo credits [Affordable Housing at Riverside's Mission Heritage Plaza — California Climate Investments](#)
[Free Transit Helps Students DASH to Class — California Climate Investments](#)