



If there's anything that unites residents and visitors across the sprawling Southern California metropolis, it is despair over transportation.

That fearsome Los Angeles traffic is about to get much worse this weekend: A 10-mile stretch of the nation's busiest highway, Interstate 405, will be shut for 53 hours as part of a \$1 billion reconstruction.

City and transit officials say the closing is necessary to demolish an overpass. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, other officials and even Erik Estrada, who as motorcycle cop "Ponch" patrolled the freeway on the TV show CHiPS in the late 1970s and early '80s have been going on TV to warn that backups could be supersized.

"If you think it's bad now," Villaraigosa warns, "on July 16 and 17, it will be an absolute nightmare. "

A road closing may seem a routine inconvenience elsewhere and hardly worth noting in cities devastated recently by floods, fires and tornadoes. But in car-dependent Los Angeles, the 405 closing is being touted as not just the biggest traffic disruption in decades but as an almost-apocalyptic event that will be felt for miles.

Call it Carmageddon.

"You need to stay away," says the California Department of Transportation regional director, Mike Miles.

"If you think you're going to bypass the closure by some secret canyon route, you and a million other people have the same idea," L.A. Police Lt. Andrew Neiman says.

Interstate 405, also known as the San Diego Freeway or simply "the 405," is an almost 50-mile bypass along the city's west side, stretching from the San Fernando Valley southward to Irvine.

It handles half a million vehicles on a typical day, Miles says.

It is a reviled bottleneck, moving traffic slowly past the South Bay beaches, snaking around the entrance to Los Angeles International Airport and skirting the UCLA campus. It divides the affluent-to-super-rich residents of coastal Santa Monica and Malibu, western Los Angeles, Beverly Hills, Bel Air and the desirable, hidden canyon neighborhoods in the Santa Monica Mountains.

The area being closed, between I-10 and U.S. 101, is its most notorious section, climbing over the Sepulveda Pass between the San Fernando Valley and the rest of the city. A habitual commuting choke point, it is the last link of the 405 to be widened for car-pool lanes.

Miles says the frenzied warnings are intended to make people realize they may be affected even if they aren't planning to go near the 405. In the region's tangled noodle of freeways, "we anticipate backups anywhere from 28 to 64 miles," he says.

Construction has closed lanes of the 405 off and on for more than a year, but this is the first complete shutdown. Officials say there is no other way to demolish the Mulholland Drive bridge.

[Neighborhoods affected include homes north of Sunset Boulevard, where prices can run to \\$50 million, says **Syd Leibovitch**, owner of Rodeo \(pronounced Row-DAY-oh\) Realty. With so much money on the line, he and his agents aren't heeding the warnings. "We're going to leave our offices open that weekend, and we're just going to hope for the best," he says.](#)

The non-rich, of course, are most affected. Sepulveda Boulevard, which parallels the closed section of freeway, will be closed to all but residents. It is dotted with small businesses whose owners are dismayed by the disruption.

"We're expecting to lose 50% to 80% of our business," says Mabel Escoton, owner of Mabel's Dog Grooming.

Maria Ortega, a groomer who commutes on the 405 from Culver City, says she can't afford to miss Saturday, her busiest day. "If I can get here, I work."

At UCLA Medical Center, which operates facilities on either side of the 405, Chief Operating Officer Shannon O'Kelley says doctors, nurses and other staff will be housed in dorms, a campus hotel, unused hospital rooms and on cots and even gurneys. The hospital will have helicopters for emergencies.

Police, Highway Patrol and fire officials have reconfigured their response regions, so responders can get to emergencies without crossing or going around the closed highway. The L.A. Fire Department plans to put some emergency medical responders on motorcycles, Capt. Alicia Mathis says.

For travelers to LAX airport, there will be fewer buses, many routed through other freeways or streets, adding hours to the trips. About 65,000 vehicles arrive or leave LAX daily, so airport officials plead with the public to make other plans. "Please," spokeswoman Nancy Castles says, "don't ask your friends to come pick you up."

Some say the warnings may be so successful that traffic will be light. Daniel Faigin, a computer security specialist and amateur freeway historian, says that's what happened during the 1984 Summer Olympics.

Still, he's not confident contractors will meet their timetable to reopen before his daily crossing of the Sepulveda Pass. "Our van is probably not going to drive in on Monday morning," Faigin says. "We'll just work from home."

GRAPHIC, B/W, Kristen O'Callaghan, USA TODAY (Map)