



CITY OF CARSON

PLANNING COMMISSION STAFF REPORT

PUBLIC HEARING: October 11, 2022

SUBJECT: Vehicle Miles Traveled Threshold Recommendation

APPLICANT: N/A

REQUEST: Consider recommending that the City Council adopt “Vehicle Miles Traveled” thresholds of significance for purposes of analyzing transportation impacts under the California Environmental Act (CEQA) and find that the action is exempt from CEQA.

COMMISSION ACTION

AYE	NO		AYE	NO	
		Chairperson (Vacant)			Hernandez
		Vice-Chair Palmer			Huff
		Diaz			Monteclaro
		Docdocil			Rashad
		Guerra			D. Thomas
					Alt. (Vacant) Alt. Mfume Alt. Wilson

I. Background

Changes in state law require the City to adopt new CEQA thresholds of significance for transportation impacts. For the purposes of CEQA, these changes will modify how the City evaluates projects for transportation impacts. Specifically, the City is required to use Vehicle Miles Travelled (VMT) instead of Level of Service (LOS) as the metric to evaluate transportation impacts in CEQA documents such as Environmental Impact Reports. Outside of the CEQA process, the City can choose to continue to evaluate projects using the LOS metric. Based on guidance provided through an implementation process led by the San Gabriel Council of Governments, City staff have prepared new CEQA transportation impact thresholds for consideration by the Planning Commission and City Council. This report summarizes the State mandate that requires modifying the CEQA thresholds, discusses the City staff recommendations, and includes a draft resolution to recommend that the City Council adopt the new CEQA transportation thresholds.

On September 27, 2013, Governor Jerry Brown signed SB 743 into law and started a process intended to fundamentally change how transportation impact analysis is conducted as part of the CEQA review of projects. SB 743 eliminates LOS as the basis for determining transportation impacts under CEQA and requires the use of VMT instead. The state is shifting the focus of CEQA traffic analysis from measuring a project's impact on automobile delay (LOS) to measuring the amount and distance of automobile travel that is attributable to a project (VMT). The State's goal in changing the metric used to determine a significant transportation impact is to encourage land use and transportation decisions that reduce greenhouse gas emissions, encourage infill development, and improve public health through active transportation.

II. Analysis

CEQA and Thresholds of Significance

CEQA requires jurisdictions to review the impact a project would have on the existing environment and to disclose those impacts to the public and decision makers and as a result reduce those impacts. CEQA establishes four categories of environmental impacts:

1. No impact
2. Less than significant impact
3. Less than significant impact with the adoption of mitigation measures (a way of reducing an impact's effect)
4. Significant unavoidable impacts

A threshold of significance is the point at which an impact moves from less than significant to significant. CEQA defines a significant impact as "a substantial, or potentially substantial, adverse change in the environment." To determine what that means for the 18 areas studied in a CEQA document, an agency adopts defined thresholds of significance. Per CEQA Guidelines 15064.7(b), each public agency is encouraged to develop and publish thresholds of significance that the agency uses in the determination of the significance of environmental effects. Thresholds of significance to be adopted for general use as part of the lead agency's environmental review process must be adopted by ordinance, resolution, rule, or regulation, and developed through a public review process and be supported by substantial evidence. Lead agencies may also use thresholds on a case-by-case basis as provided in Section 15064(b)(2).

In relation to traffic, the City for many years has used level of service (LOS) to determine if a project would create a significant impact.

Traffic Analysis & Level of Service

The focus of most traffic analysis is on a project's impact on nearby intersections and roadway segments. This analysis compares how the existing intersection or roadway segment functions in comparison to how it will function when the project is complete. At the heart of this analysis is how an intersection or street segment should function. To analyze this, engineers look at the intersections' and roadway segments' level of service (LOS). LOS, in its simplest form, is a ratio of an intersection's or roadway segment's volume to its capacity. If the volume of traffic exceeds the intersection's capacity, one would expect to find traffic delays. If the capacity exceeds volume, one expects to find an absence of congestion. LOS does not take into consideration traffic signal timing, so while an intersection's volume to capacity ratio could demonstrate significant capacity, the timing of the intersection could result in congestion.

Existing Thresholds of Significance

The City's existing thresholds of significance rely on LOS and are adjusted to the unique character of the City and the street's context within the network. The existing thresholds develop a more sensitive approach to traffic planning so that streets with different purposes, functions, and in different neighborhoods have different thresholds. Staff still believes that this approach is valid. While it cannot be used for CEQA anymore, the City can continue to use these thresholds outside of CEQA.

The Movement Toward VMT

The move away from LOS and toward VMT is related to a movement that started in Portland, Oregon in 1971 and slowly was recognized by the U.S. Department of Transportation in 2010. This movement, called Complete Streets, was championed by a coalition of organizations including the Association of American Retired Persons, professional organizations overseeing the design of streets (including the American Planning Association, the American Society of Landscape Architects, and Institute of Transportation Engineers), and the National Association of Realtors. A complete street is a street planned, operated, and maintained to enable safe, convenient, comfortable travel for users of all ages and abilities regardless of whether the user is using a wheelchair, walking, bicycling, driving, or riding on public transit. On June 8, 2022, the City Council adopted a complete streets policy (see Attachment 2).

In September of 2013, the California State Legislature adopted Senate Bill (SB) 743. This law set the State down a course of measuring a project's environmental impact not by its creation of congestion, but by whether and how much it increases total vehicle miles traveled. Vehicle miles traveled (VMT) is the number of miles all vehicles travel, and it is the State's goal to reduce VMT and thereby reduce air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions.

The legislation was spurred by occasions where the CEQA analysis concluded that a project would have a negative effect on the environment even though the purpose of the project was to improve the environment. In a notable case, the City of San Francisco wanted to replace a traffic lane with a bicycle lane. This project would be expected to have a positive effect on the environment because it would reduce pollution and greenhouse gas emissions. However, because the change would result in additional

automobile congestion, opponents to the bicycle lane argued that there would be a significant environmental effect.

While SB 743 changes the focus of traffic analysis to reducing VMT, it also does not prohibit cities from setting LOS standards in its General Plan for infrastructure planning purposes. SB 743 reorients CEQA away from traffic congestion and toward the negative environmental effects of automobile trips (air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions), thus refocusing CEQA on the environment.

Proposed CEQA VMT Transportation Thresholds and Discussion Points

While State law now requires cities to adopt or use VMT thresholds, there are still some points on which the City has some discretion. The bullets below highlight these points and provide staff's recommendations.

- **Screening Out Projects** – The State allows cities to filter or “screen out” local serving projects so that they do not even require a traffic study to look at VMT impacts. The idea behind this is that since they will serve the local population, they are likely reducing the need for people to drive further away and thus are reducing VMT. City staff is recommending adopting a list of local service projects that is consistent with the State’s Office of Planning and Research’s (OPR) guidance. This list includes new retail buildings up to 50,000 square feet in floor area, parks, public K-12 schools, day care centers, churches and such. The list also includes projects generating less than 110 daily trips; this includes 11 single-family units, 16 multi-family units, 10,000 square feet of office space, and 15,000 square feet of industrial space. For a full list, see Attachment 3. The City can adopt a lower number of daily trips for projects of a small size; but higher thresholds are not allowed.
- **Screening Out Projects in Low VMT Areas** – The State allows cities to filter out regions of the City that are already considered “low VMT” traffic analysis zones (TAZs). The rationale here is that the area likely already has a good mix of uses and adding additional uses in this area provides for less trips and bundling of trips. Staff is recommending to be consistent with OPR guidance to screen out residential and office projects located in low VMT areas. Low VMT is defined as 15 percent below the Baseline VMT metrics.
- **Screening Out Projects in Transit Priority Areas (TPA)** – City staff recommendation is to be consistent with OPR guidance to screen out projects in Transit Priority Areas defined an area within ½-mile of a major transit stop that is existing or planned, if the planned stop is scheduled to be completed within the planning horizon year. Per Section 21099 of the Public Resource Code, a major transit stop is defined as a site containing an existing rail transit station or the intersection of two or more major bus routes with a frequency of service interval of 15 minutes or less during the morning and afternoon peak commute periods.
- **Screening Out Affordable Housing** – City staff recommendation is to be consistent with OPR guidance to screen out affordable housing developments or affordable housing units within mixed-use developments pursuant to Sections 15183.3 and 15332 of Title 14 of the California Code of Regulations.
- **Setting a Baseline VMT** – The Baseline VMT is defined as the average VMT for the City of Carson represented by City of Carson as measured by VMT per capita, VMT per employee, or VMT per service population. A project’s VMT will be compared to the baseline VMT when determining potential significant impacts.

- When a VMT Impact Becomes Significant (Land Use Plans) – City staff recommendation is to be consistent with OPR guidance, in that significant impacts will occur if the VMT per service population for the land use plan exceeds 15 percent below the baseline VMT.
- When a VMT Impact Becomes Significant (Projects) – Significant impacts will occur if a project generates VMT (per capita, per employee, or per service population) higher than 15 percent below the baseline VMT.
- When a VMT Impact Becomes Significant (Transportation Projects) – Significant impacts will occur if the projects result in a net increase in VMT.

The proposed VMT thresholds are set forth in full in Exhibit A to the proposed resolution (Exhibit 1 to this Report). The proposed thresholds are consistent with OPR guidance. The process utilized the SCAG model, reflecting City of Carson baseline land use and transportation network to develop the VMT thresholds. This was largely completed through technical analysis using the model and spreadsheets and translated into transportation study guidelines. Further background information is provided in Exhibit 4.

III. Environmental Review

The adoption of new local CEQA VMT thresholds of significance for transportation impacts will not have a significant environmental impact and is exempt from the CEQA pursuant to Section 15308 of Title 14 of the California Code of Regulations because the action is undertaken by the City for the protection of the environment. The revised CEQA thresholds will be compliant with State law (SB 743) and will be used in a regulatory process (CEQA process) that involves procedures for the protection of the environment. Accordingly, the action is exempt from the environmental review requirements of CEQA pursuant to Section 15308 of Title 14 of the California Code of Regulations.

IV. Public Notice

Notice of the public hearing was posted on September 29, 2022, and advertised in the September 29, 2022, edition of the Daily Breeze. The agenda was posted at City Hall no less than 72 hours prior to the Planning Commission meeting.

V. Recommendation

That the Planning Commission:

- **ADOPT** Resolution No. 22-XXXX, entitled “A RESOLUTION OF THE PLANNING COMMISSION OF THE CITY OF CARSON, CALIFORNIA, RECOMMENDING THE CITY COUNCIL ADOPT ‘VEHICLE MILES TRAVELED’ THRESHOLDS OF SIGNIFICANCE FOR PURPOSES OF ANALYZING TRANSPORTATION IMPACTS UNDER THE CALIFORNIA ENVIRONMENTAL ACT (CEQA) AND FIND THAT THE ACTION IS EXEMPT FROM CEQA”

VI. Exhibits

1. Proposed Resolution
 - a. Proposed VMT Thresholds of Significance
2. Complete Street Policy
3. Screen-Out Projects List
4. City of Carson SB 743 Implementation presentation (Fehr & Peers)

Prepared by: Alvie Betancourt, Planning Manager