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Report: Highway 4 ranks among nation's most congested commute

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Contra Costa Times

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ANTIOCH -- A recent national freeway traffic study confirms what travel-weary East Contra Costa County commuters could have surmised.

Westbound Highway 4 from Hillcrest Avenue to Somersville Road on weekday mornings is the Bay Area's most congested commute corridor, according to a March study by traffic data tracking firm INRIX. Nationally, it ranks as the 27th worst.

It takes about three minutes to travel the road when there's no traffic, but on weekdays the drive averages almost 12 minutes, according to the Kirkland, Wash.-based company's study.

On some weekday mornings, it can take drivers almost 20 minutes to slog through the three-mile stretch, the study said.

"It's a joy," Brentwood resident Rich McDaniel said sarcastically.

It can sometimes take more than an hour to drive 22 miles to McDaniel's office in Concord, he said.

"You just get numb to it after a while," said Tom Anderson, who merges onto Highway 4 at L Street in Antioch on his way to Alameda.

"It doesn't matter if you're rich or poor -- you're stuck," he said.

The afternoon commute eastbound on Highway 4 through Pittsburg is almost as bad. It was the second worst Bay Area corridor identified in the study and ranks 37th nationally. Six other Bay Area freeway corridors cracked the list's top 100, including the eastbound afternoon commute on Interstate 580 from Eden Canyon Road in Castro

Valley to El Charro Road in Livermore, which ranked No. 3

in the Bay Area and No. 43 nationally.

The San Francisco-Oakland-Fremont metropolitan area was the sixth-most congested in the United States, behind Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Washington, D.C., and Dallas-Fort Worth. The San Jose-Sunnyvale-Santa Clara area ranked 18th.

East Contra Costa leaders acknowledge local traffic is a pain, but point out help will soon be on the way. Work continues on widening Highway 4 through Antioch from two to four lanes. The half-billion-dollar project is anticipated to be complete by 2015, barring any funding complications.

Construction to widen Highway 4 from near Bay Point over the past decade has left a pinch point just west of Loveridge Road in Pittsburg, as the freeway narrows from eight to four lanes.

"We're working to get rid of the funnel effect. Unfortunately, it's a case of no pain, no gain," Contra Costa Supervisor Federal Glover said.

Ground was broken Friday morning for a \$35.7 million project to widen Highway 4 from Somersville to Contra Loma Boulevard. Construction continues on widening the segment between Loveridge and Somersville.

Oakley Mayor Jim Frazier understands the frustration of Highway 4 firsthand.

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Frazier, who sits on the Contra Costa Transportation Authority and several other regional transportation groups, has commuted to Danville for 27 years.

McDaniel remembers hearing about the widening when he moved to Brentwood more than 20 years ago. Highway 4 traffic used to crawl over the Willow Pass grade into Concord before the widening started, Frazier said.

"It used to be really brutal," said Anderson, who has driven on Highway 4 to work for 28 years.

"It has widened through Pittsburg, so the progress has been there. It's just amazingly slow," McDaniel said.

While sitting in Highway 4 stop-and-go, McDaniel created a lighthearted jingle that embodies the dismay called the "Highway 4 Blues."

The morning backup is so bad that Frazier takes side streets through Antioch and merges onto Highway 4 at Loveridge.

The INRIX rankings were based on real-time data and analysis from about 4 million vehicles carrying global-positioning devices that traveled the nation's major roads, said Jim Bak, a company spokesman.

The study looked at the additional travel time on a given road during rush hour compared with when traffic is flowing freely, he said.

Other Bay Area freeway stretches that ranked in the top 100 were evening commutes on westbound Highway 24 in Orinda headed toward the Caldecott Tunnel and the Bay Bridge from San Francisco to Treasure Island.

The morning commute at the Bay Bridge Toll Plaza and the evening drive in Fremont on northbound Interstate 680 between Scott Creek Road and Mission Road also cracked the Top 100.

Along with BART's extension into East Contra Costa, commuters should notice a difference once Highway 4 is widened, Glover said.

"It's not going to resolve the region's traffic problem in its entirety," he said, "but it will help a great deal."

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