

OPINION

Bastone: Minutes Matter

By PETER BASTONE August 23, 2017



When the San Clemente City Council forced the closure of Saddleback Memorial Medical Center's San Clemente hospital this past year, South Orange County residents lost the only public emergency room along the I-5 corridor between Oceanside and Mission Viejo. Anyone in the San Clemente area seeking emergency or critical care is now forced to struggle through traffic congestion on I-5 all the way to Mission Viejo's Mission Hospital, which is more than 12.5 miles away with travel times that can take more than a half-hour at certain times.

In emergency situations, there is a saying in the medical community: "minutes matter." In my experience, truer words have never been spoken. Minutes can mean the difference between life and death for a patient experiencing a life-threatening emergency such as a heart attack, stroke, allergic reaction, or a severe injury from a traffic collision, just to name a few.

The I-5 corridor between Mission Viejo and Oceanside is one of the most heavily traveled areas in South Orange County, and one of the most congested. Unlike similarly busy stretches in other areas of the region, there are currently no alternative routes to avoid this congestion. Instead, residents and the ambulance companies that provide services to these communities, are subject to the current conditions of I-5. This means more than 100,000 residents, including seniors and parents of young children, have no choice but to brave a trip up I-5 if a medical emergency arises.

When the San Clemente hospital was closed, residents were told to use a nearby hospital in case of an emergency. But with the closest trauma center over 12 miles away, what happens when there is an accident or simply heavy traffic on the freeway? Without an alternative route, critical minutes are spent in traffic, rather than in a hospital receiving care. It is vitally important our first responders have an alternative route that can both alleviate traffic congestion on the freeway and allow emergency vehicles to transport patients quickly and efficiently. Having the 241 Toll Road finally connect to I-5 is the best option to relieve traffic and, more importantly, provide an emergency route for first responders, including police, fire, and ambulances.

However, as a resident of South Orange County, I have heard misinformation and scare tactics that imply connecting the 241 Toll Road to I-5 would negatively affect the overall health of community members. As a healthcare professional, I can tell you this statement is patently false. The reality of the situation is that not only have numerous studies shown that a decrease in traffic congestion leads to a decrease in dangerous pollutant emissions, but an alternate route could literally save lives as timely access to emergency care would be improved. Cities like Aliso Viejo, Lake Forest, Rancho Santa Margarita, Newport Beach, Irvine, and nearly a dozen more have toll roads that enter their city boundaries, yet it is ridiculous to allege the residents in these communities suffer negative health effects or are negatively affected by these roadways. To the contrary, this highway system reduces traffic congestion not only on I-5 and I-405, but also on our local city streets in Orange County.

Recently, a small plane crash on I-405 and a raging fire in San Clemente reminded us that emergency situations compound traffic, thereby increasing the risks to public safety. In these cases, the absence of the 73 Toll Road could have made a bad situation manifestly worse. Again, in a medical emergency when lives are at stake, minutes matter.

For most of us, traffic congestion is a nuisance making us late for work, appointments, or family gatherings. But for someone in need of emergency medical care, traffic can be the difference between life and death. Regardless of where you live, that is something we should all be concerned about.

Peter Bastone is a South Orange County resident and Past President and Chief Executive Officer of Mission Hospital and Regional Trauma Center.

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