

## 'Carmageddon': Los Angeles freeway shuts down

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Associated Press

When the sun rises above Los Angeles on Saturday, residents in this car-dependent, traffic-choked city will see a rare sight: a 10-mile stretch of one of the nation's busiest freeways turned into a virtual ghost road.

Interstate 405, a freeway normally so clogged that locals like to joke that its name is shorthand for "traffic that moves no faster than 4 or 5 miles an hour," is closing for 53 hours for a major construction project.

Workers started shutting down on- and off-ramps along the major highway beginning at 7 p.m. Friday and began closing off lanes at 10 p.m.

As crews worked feverishly to get the freeway open in time for Monday morning's rush-hour, residents have been making plans for weeks to stay off local roads, lest they trigger what officials dubbed "Carmageddon."

Such an event could back up vehicles from the 405 to surface streets and other freeways, causing a domino effect that could paralyze much of the city.

With warnings having been broadcast through television, radio, social media and flashing freeway signs as far away as San Francisco, much of the city's nearly 4 million residents appeared ready to stay off the roads.

Traffic was unusually light in the section of freeway slated for closure and most freeways in Los Angeles as residents heeded warnings to stay off roads Friday evening.

Television news broadcasts showed that surface streets were unusually quiet in other parts of Los Angeles, including Laurel Canyon, a winding, narrow north-south route which could be used as an alternative to Interstate 405 for travel between Los Angeles and the San Fernando Valley.

Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa said he thinks traffic will move smoothly if motorists take his advice to stay close to home throughout the weekend.

"We can either say we survived Carmageddon or we survived the Carmageddon hype," he said.

If people listen, there will be no shortage of staycation activities awaiting them.

They can snag free popcorn at movie theaters along the 405 or drop in on Michael Jackson's dermatologist for 25-percent-off Botox injections so that frazzled commuters won't look quite so frazzled.

Those who do want that real road warrior look might consider swinging by T-Man's Tattoos (located just off the 405) in the San Fernando Valley.

"If you come on in and mention you're in town because you're stuck from Carmageddon, you can get 15 percent off tattoos and piercings," proprietor Howard Teman said.

For those who do get caught in traffic, LA musician Ken Elkinson is offering free downloads of his boxed set, "Music for Commuting," a collection of soothing tunes.

For those wanting a laugh, Grammy-winning humorist Stan Freberg is planning to visit a mall just off the freeway to sign copies of his latest CD, "Songs in the Key of Freberg," which features a song called "Gridlock."

That is if he can get there.

"We could end up just toodling around in traffic in our Prius, playing 'Gridlock' ourselves," he said of himself and his wife, Hunter.

Along with all the gimmicky promotions and attempts to cash in ("I Survived Carmageddon T-shirts are being sold all over the place), there have also been months of planning.

Construction crews have been gearing up, but so have police, fire and medical officials seeking to ensure that everything goes smoothly. Or, if it doesn't, to ensure they are prepared to handle any emergency.

Heavy equipment needed to demolish a section of a 50-year-old bridge as part of a \$1 billion freeway-widening project, was already in place Friday, hours before the 405's midnight closure.

Sections of the bridge's pilings that are being torn out had been marked and prepped in advance.

The city fire department put two dozen additional engines, fire companies and ambulances into service, placing them in neighborhoods that firefighters might have a hard time getting to from jammed roadways.

"Our biggest concern is gridlock, obviously," Battalion Chief Chuck Butler said Friday. "There are a lot of areas over in West L.A. and the San Fernando Valley that we expect to be impacted due to the closure."

Much of the section of freeway that is being shut down winds through a hillside pass near Beverly Hills and other communities that are susceptible to brushfires.

Wildfire season, however, hasn't reached its peak yet, Butler said. Besides, this weekend's expected humid weather should further reduce the threat of a fire.

The UCLA Health System, which runs the huge Santa Monica-UCLA Medical Center located near the 405, put three helicopter companies on standby to transport patients and human organs.

The center also stockpiled extra medical supplies and 5,200 boxed lunches for its staff.

For those who do have to drive, a Cedars-Sinai Medical Center psychiatrist was offering advice on how to keep calm and stay safe.

Among Dr. Waguih William IsHak's advice: avoid road rage at all costs, apologize profusely to anyone you accidentally cut off in traffic, be sure to leave for your destination with a full tank of gas and a cell phone.

And, oh yeah, he said, don't forget to go to the bathroom before you leave.

Or, better yet, authorities say, stay at home.

For those who do, Time Warner Cable promised to have technicians in the affected area ready to fix any TV-related problem.

The company was also activating a special "Beat the Traffic" channel with 24-hour reports from the Los Angeles Regional Transportation Management Center.

Some people were throwing Carmageddon parties at their homes, while others left for their destinations well before the freeway shut down.

Dan Haff, who lives in the northwest San Fernando Valley, far away from the construction site, was hosting five friends Friday so that the entire group could get to a planned paintball competition on time Saturday.

"They may have to stay with me for the weekend," he said.