**Daily Breeze**
**Copley News Service**
**Driving in Los Angeles is 'the pits'**
Quality of life report gives region an "F" based on rise in fatalities and commute time. Population growth blamed.
By Gordon Smith
January 6, 2006

With carpooling down, highway fatalities up and traffic congestion getting steadily worse, driving in the Los Angeles region got an "F" grade in an annual report card on the area's quality of life released Thursday by the Southern California Association of Governments.

It was the first "F" that SCAG has handed out since the regional planning agency began giving letter grades to issues such as housing, income, air quality and mobility seven years ago.

"The 'F' grade is deserved, and the public in general knows it's deserved," said Paul Nowatka, a Torrance city councilman and member of SCAG's regional council.

"The South Bay has become terribly congested," he noted. "It has become the pass-through area for almost everybody. We have 500,000 people going through the city of Torrance on a given day, just because they're traveling from one place to another."

Another SCAG regional council member, Port Hueneme City Councilwoman Toni Young, offered her own succinct view of the region's traffic.
"It's the pits," she said.

The SCAG report, which analyzed data from 2004, rated public safety a "B" based on a 10 percent decline in the region's violent crime rate from a year earlier.

Education got a "D," in part because the Los Angeles area ranks last among the nation's nine largest metropolitan regions in the percentage of adults with at least a high-school diploma (77 percent).

Housing also earned a "D," with SCAG officials noting that the home-ownership rate crept up to 57 percent as the housing affordability rate plummeted to its lowest level in 17 years.

Forty-five percent of the region's homeowners shell out 30 percent or more of their household income for housing, while 54 percent of the renters do the same, the report said.

"Virtually nothing is more sacred than a home, but in Southern California it's getting more and more difficult to attain each year," said county Supervisor Yvonne Brathwaite Burke, another member of the SCAG regional council.

Many of the region's woes have their roots in soaring population growth, SCAG officials said.

During 2004, the six-county region grew by 284,000 residents -- a figure that represents an astounding 10 percent of the nation's total population growth, and 53 percent of the state's total population growth, for the period.

Still, it was worsening traffic and related issues that set off the loudest alarm bells for SCAG's planning team. For example, while highway fatalities around the state and nation decreased from 2002 to 2004, they increased by 8 percent in the Los Angeles region.

Car-pooling dropped by 3 percent in the region from 2000 to 2004, while drive-alone commuting -- and travel times to work -- edged up.

"The carpooling thing has failed us for some reason," Nowatka said. "I don't know what to do about it. It's an enigma."
He pointed out that cargo movement into and out of the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach is another prime cause of increasing congestion.

"There are so many trucks on the road than there ever were before," said Nowatka, who believes that truck-only lanes on an expanded Long Beach (710) Freeway would help.

"Almost every solution involves money," he added. "But we're somehow going to have to move people into public transportation."

SCAG Executive Director Mark Pisano reiterated his call for denser housing along major transportation corridors, saying that the region can become more livable only if transportation, housing and land use decisions are linked.

Burke agreed. "We have to make it easy for people to make personal changes," she said.