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Transport chief suggests fuel, traffic solutions
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By Samantha Gonzaga, Staff writer

LONG BEACH — U.S. Secretary of Transportation Norm Mineta on Thursday discussed alternative fuel research, Southern California's competitiveness in the global market and possible solutions to alleviate congestion affecting the region's ports and highways before more than 150 elected officials from six counties.

Mineta made his remarks at the annual general assembly meeting of the Southern California Association of Governments at downtown's Westin Hotel. His keynote speech came after heated debate over a legislative bill that would install a 13th seat, chosen by the Los Angeles City Council, on the South Coast Air Quality Management District board.

Some questioned the bill drafted by Assemblyman Ted Lieu, D-Torrance and its effectiveness in ensuring clean air and equitable board representation for smaller cities surrounding Los Angeles or the Inland Empire, which also suffers the brunt of poor air quality.

AQMD spokeswoman Debra Reed expressed the organization's opposition to the bill, saying that it doesn't take into account the impact of air pollution. SCAG voted to take no position on the bill, which has yet to be reviewed on the legislative floor.

But Redondo Beach Councilman Don Szerlip argued that residents on the west side of Los Angeles County need better representation on the board.

"The primary polluters are right in our back yard," he said, referring to the Los Angeles International Airport and the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach. "And we are coughing and choking under their yokes and we need a voice in the table."

Mineta said listening to arguments for and against the bill reminded him of his own time in local government as San Jose's mayor, adding,"I only wish there were more members in Congress who served in the local level" to experience public service in closer proximity to voters.

Before beginning his presentation, Mineta spoke about the state of the nation's economy and skyrocketing gasoline prices.

"The good news is that the United States economy is booming," he said. "Last year, our economy outpaced those of every other major industrialized nation. And just-released numbers for the first quarter of this year show an impressive 4.8-percent growth in GDP. With the growing economy creating 5.1 million new jobs since August 2003, unemployment is lower today than the average of any of the last three decades."

Mineta said gasoline prices now averaging about $3.50 per gallon in the Long Beach and Los Angeles area prompted President Bush's four-point plan to confront the problem. The plan promotes energy conservation, increased oil supplies in the short term and more research and incentives for developing alternative fuel.

The Department of Transportation is responsible for the key part of the president's plan the push to reform Corporate Average Fuel Economy standards, which determine the fuel efficiency of vehicles produced by domestic manufacturers.

"The current CAFE program offers little incentive for automakers to make their largest and most profitable automobiles more fuel efficient, not when they can average out their fleet with small cars," he said. "The current approach also encourages production of weaker, lighter vehicles that puts passengers at risk during crashes."

Fuel efficiency and gas prices are exacerbated by the Department of Transportation's other challenge congestion.

"Southern California's congestion is a particular concern," Mineta said. "This region is integral to the United States' continued leadership in global commerce. Southern California handles 44 percent of the nation's total imports, and 25 percent of all exports.

"But already-strained ports in the region are anticipating 40-percent growth in container traffic in the next five years," he continued. "And container activity at the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach is expected to double by 2020."

According to numbers compiled by the department, the Los Angeles area burned through an extra 407 million gallons of gas while sitting in traffic for a whopping 623 million hours in 2003. The cost of the delay was a reported $10.7 billion.

The gridlock does not just affect the region as more than half the containers arriving at Los Angeles and Long Beach's ports are bound out of state.

"The backups are not just a question of capacity constraints at the ports themselves, but of what happens beyond the gates on congested highways and freight railroads already stretched to their limits," Mineta said.

At the moment, several things are in place to tackle the problem:

A DOT Southern California Gateway office in Long Beach, "the first step in our commitment to this vital region," Mineta said. "We recognize that if Southern California doesn't work, the country doesn't work."

A surface transportation bill Bush signed into law in August, whose provisions include improving freight movement along gateway seaports and major trade corridors and encouraging the private sector with credit assistance to make investments inside seaports. The private sector remains an untapped source to strengthen the public infrastructure and create a 21st century transportation system, Mineta said.