

Monday,
JUN. 16,
2014

Los Angeles Times

Commentary

Why Your News Station May Start Issuing a “Walking Report,” and the App that Inspired It All

By NIGEL TUFNEL

Contact the reporter at ntufnel@latimes.com

Commuting safely and quickly is a concern for many Americans. Being informed about traffic and road conditions is nearly an American past time. Everything from radio traffic reports to more modern innovations like the app Waze demonstrate how people continually attempt to gather and sort information about their upcoming commutes. Particularly in Los Angeles, getting to work and getting there fast is an every-day goal. But what about those of us who don't drive?

For young Americans, commuting is becoming less and less about cars and road traffic. Millennials are driving far less than their parents and are not as invested in the cultural and social importance of cars, according to a study commissioned by Zipcar and released on January 27, 2014. Furthermore, according to an earlier study by the American Public Transportation Association (APTA), the number of drivers between the ages of 16 and 30 fell by 25% between 2001 and 2009. There were similar drops in other age groups as well, but the drop for young people was more than double the drop of any other age group. More and more, young people are walking, biking, and using public transportation. Cars are no longer the be-all and end-all of commuting.

While the APTA study did not determine why the percentage of young people who are driving has decreased, several trends seem to point to why alternative transportation is becoming more popular. Concerns about the environment as well as the increased cost of gas and insurance make cars less appealing than they once were.

Of course, road traffic is not nearly as much of a problem for pedestrians as it is for drivers. While pedestrians need to be wary of cars, they will not get held up the same way drivers are. Even in areas with crowded sidewalks, like the corner of Hollywood and

Highland, foot traffic does not delay people at the same rate as car traffic. But surely this does not mean that pedestrians live a worry-free life; what kind of information does the pedestrian need to make their commute safe? There is a different array of safety concerns for pedestrians, and there are far fewer information services for them.

WiseWalk, an app whose projected release date was announced earlier this month, answers just these sorts of questions. Safety apps for smart phones have been a growing field for some time. Kitestring, for example, provides a system to help ensure women's safety at night. But, WiseWalk deals more closely with the growing trend of alternative transportation and the safety and information needs of pedestrians. Capitalizing on the changing nature of transportation and overall safety concerns for both genders, WiseWalk allows users to self-report safety problems along their journeys. These concerns include sidewalk closures, construction, dangerous intersection, and limited visibility. The app also partners with local police stations and public works departments so that users can be sure that their complaints will be heard by the people who can fix the problem.

It is a changing world out there, and the radio traffic report is no longer enough. We learn about traffic in many ways, so why not start learning about all the different ways your commute can be affected? Hopefully, news stations and others will pick up on WiseWalk's approach and start to offer more information about the infrastructure we rely on.