

Here's What Moves Wendy Greuel

The L.A. councilwoman loves to drive — and she wants to use her seat on the transportation panel to help fellow motorists get more up to speed.

By STEVE HYMON
Times Staff Writer

The latest member of the Los Angeles City Council vowing to take some of the "lock" out of gridlock admits that she loves to drive and lightened her lead foot only when she became a mother.

Born and raised in the San Fernando Valley, Wendy Greuel has been driving since her 16th birthday, commutes in an SUV hybrid from Studio City to down-

town and has keen sympathy for motorists. And now she is in a position to help them.

Greuel, 44, recently became chairwoman of the council's Transportation Committee, enabling her to influence policy over the management of more than 6,000 miles of road and a city bus fleet that annually carries about 30 million passengers.

With that authority, she believes that by sweating the small stuff — whether by possibly moving bus stops that block traffic or enforcing the city's new rush-hour ban on road construction — she can begin to ease one of the nation's most intractable traffic jams.

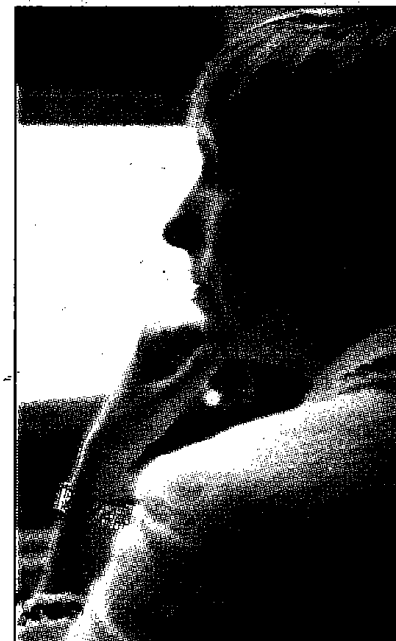
Of course, decreasing congestion in L.A. is much like trying to stop water from flowing downhill. Victories tend to be tempo-

rary. Add a lane to the freeway? The lane is soon clogged.

Like many other politicians, Greuel also thinks that part of the long-term solution is building a cohesive regional mass transit system. But adding another light rail line or extending the subway does not directly fall under the purview of her committee. Instead, she is focused on the practical.

"I'm one of those people that if someone says, 'No, it can't be done' or the bureaucracy says no, that makes me even more dedicated to change it," Greuel said. "I do it sometimes in a quiet way of nudge, nudge, nudge and keep pushing, and that's what we're going to do on this."

Greuel is aiming to fix the kind of teeth-gnashing problems [See Greuel, Page B8]



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KEYING ON GRIDLOCK:
L.A. City Councilwoman Wendy Greuel would like to ease some of the nation's worst traffic.

[Greuel, from Page B1]

familiar to motorists in the city. The list includes:

- Making sure the city enforces the rush-hour ban on road construction, a law she wrote and Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa recently enacted by executive directive. Although its overall effect cannot be measured, Greuel said it would prevent some unnecessary traffic jams.

- Trying to synchronize all of the city's traffic signals. Of the 4,325 intersections in the city, more than half are either not synchronized or lack the latest systems. Large swaths of the West Valley, South Los Angeles, the harbor area and Eagle Rock lack such computerized synchronization.

- Pursue more state and federal funding for road and transit projects in Los Angeles, including more carpool lanes on freeways that go through town. Greuel said she plans to comb through L.A.'s \$6-billion budget for more money for its underfunded — and some would argue underachieving — transportation agency.

- Adding more parking spaces at transit stops and perhaps adding or rearranging DASH bus lines to connect big employers to the regional mass transit system.

- Looking at bus-only lanes, reversible lanes and possibly identifying places where one-way streets may be more efficient than two-way thoroughfares.

Despite her support for mass transit, she believes that the car will continue to be the primary mode of transportation for most Angelenos. She should know. With events scattered throughout town, she does not take public transportation because it's not practical. However, Greuel says she intends to try to at least occasionally take mass transit to set an example.

"I am not kidding myself that tomorrow I'm going to change the traffic patterns in the city of Los Angeles," she said. "But if you have 10 different items you can accomplish and you can lessen someone's stress and it makes a difference in someone's life, I see that as success."

Genevieve Giuliano, the director of the Metrans Transportation Center at USC, agrees that there are dividends in pursuing the small stuff, which does not get much attention. She

served several years ago on a city task force that reached the same conclusion.

"If you look over the years, improvements over traffic engineering have been remarkable in terms of how much traffic has been accommodated," she said. Is it going to solve gridlock? Giuliano says no, but she believes that small gains can be made citywide for hundreds of millions of dollars less than building another light rail line that serves only one corridor.

Greuel has long been involved in local politics, serving as an advisor on social issues for Mayor Tom Bradley for a decade and then working in the mid-1990s as a field officer for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

In 1997 she entered the private sector, working in community and government affairs for DreamWorks SKG. It was a comfortable job with a generous salary, but Greuel missed the public sector and decided to run for City Council.

In a special election to replace the retiring Joel Wachs, Greuel eked out a 225-vote win over then-Assemblyman Tony Cardenas in the spring of 2002 and then easily won reelection the next year.

Since taking office, Greuel has earned a reputation as a hard-working, accessible council member who is deft at avoiding controversy.

Her most significant council accomplishment was joining with Eric Garcetti to push through business tax reform in 2003 after it had languished for a decade. On a constituent level, she created a sidewalk repair program that allows residents and the city to split the cost of repairs with the guarantee that fixes will be done soon after a complaint is made.

"She knows that it's the little things that make our life easier," said Nick Patsouras, a transportation consultant and long-time board member of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority.

Greuel's long hours serve as a running joke in her office. After her son was born in July 2003, in her first full year in office, Greuel hauled both infant Thomas and

his nanny to City Hall most days. In-N-Out and Bob's Big Boy are favorite stops on the way home from late nights on the job.

After a failed attempt at the council presidency in 2003, Greuel was unanimously elected as president pro tem in July. That puts her third in line in the city's power structure. She has developed a strong relationship with the new mayor and is well-connected in the business world and among neighborhood activists.

It's widely assumed in City Hall that Greuel will someday run for mayor or city controller. She does not rule out a run for higher office in the city, but said she had no immediate plans beyond seeking reelection in the 2nd Council District in 2007. She also said that "I'm not afraid of having a real job" outside elected office.

Still, leading the Transportation Committee can be seen as giving Greuel a perch to tackle

one of the issues that most resonates with voters. But even making small moves will be difficult on such a massive, complex traffic grid.

Take, for example, the issue of traffic light synchronization.

About 70% of the intersections in the city have some form of synchronized lights, said John Fisher, assistant general manager of the city's Transportation Department.

But that does not mean that motorists can drive in one direction and still not hit a red light, Fisher said.

Several things can interfere with synchronization. A high volume of cars combined with signals in proximity means that no driver is going to make more than a few green lights at a time. Also, when a pedestrian hits the "walk" button, it disrupts the timing of that traffic signal in relation to other nearby signals.

More than anything, the system needs money. It would cost more than \$100 million to install the latest synchronized signals citywide. Securing that amount of money and executing the work would be a significant challenge for Greuel.

Last Friday, Greuel got a firsthand look at the complexities of signal synchronization, touring the city's traffic control complex, four stories below ground level in City Hall East. The place has the look of NASA Mission Control, with computers and giant video screens showing traffic throughout the city.

During her one-hour visit, Greuel watched a live feed of a city work crew repaving Van Nuys Boulevard before 9 a.m., a possible violation of the city's rush-hour construction ban.

Thirty minutes later, a power outage knocked out most of the traffic signals in northern downtown, about 20 of which continued to blink red long after electricity had been restored. Soon, a video screen with live shots of downtown streets showed traffic starting to back up at some intersections.

It was a sobering and enlightening view of the road that lies ahead for Greuel. Although impressed with how high-tech the traffic center was, three decades of motoring around L.A. and her penchant for "nudging" bureaucracies also told her something else. "There are things we can actually do," she said.