

Don't block emergency traffic

By Bill Becker

Ross Perot made a big splash last year with his populist call for trust in the basic good sense of the American people, but I always have had doubts about this ineffable quality "we the people" are said to possess. These doubts are confirmed each day as I drive home from Tarzana to Woodland Hills along Ventura Boulevard.

The major drawback to this route is an inevitable series of stops for the

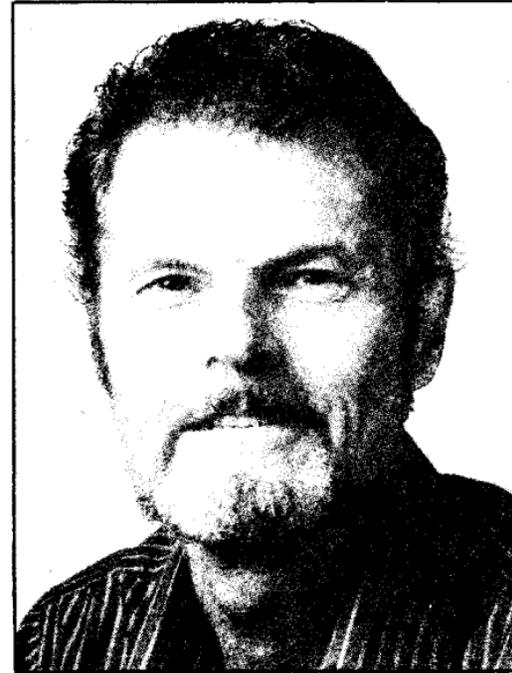
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three-way light at the Vanalden/Ventura Freeway on-ramp. A few hundred feet east of the light, on the north side of Ventura, sits a fire station. On the pavement in front of the station are painted a thick white barrier stripe and a large "KEEP CLEAR" in each lane.

Nevertheless, when the light turns red and westbound traffic backs up to the curve east of Topeka Drive, it is virtually assured that the "keep clear" signs and the stripe will disappear under idling cars.

A few weeks ago, the station doors opened and a paramedic van emerged with its siren on. Luckily, Ventura traffic was moving, so the space in front of the station cleared immediately as upstream traffic stopped at the stripe and downstream cars pulled to the right or continued on. The paramedics passed



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through the gap carefully, heading east.

After traffic resumed a few seconds later, the light at Vanalden turned red. As I expected, the drivers ahead of me, who had just stopped for the paramedics, rushed over the stripe to block the "keep clear" space.

For these drivers, the two seconds saved by closing the gap clearly outweighed the need of firefighters or paramedics to reach their destinations as quickly as possible. I spoke later with a firefighter at the station, and learned that the signs had been painted there just because of the difficulty they had in leaving the station during peak traffic flow.

What defense can there be for such

self-serving behavior by motorists? None whatsoever. A particular driver might argue that the trucks would probably not be called out while he or she is blocking the exit. Preposterous. First, it does not matter who is blocking the way — the signs say "keep clear" for reasons that are obvious to any child. Second, the earlier paramedic call created a significant chance that other trucks might also be called out. This should have been uppermost in drivers' minds when the light turned red.

Will motorists' self-centered behavior here be justified if quick maneuvering when the doors open reduces the delay in the truck's departure to only five or 10 seconds? The answer is that even one or two seconds in an emergency situation can mean the difference between life and death.

Do drivers close the space because

they are afraid to be honked at by impatient motorists behind them? Such a fear is perhaps a worse excuse than selfishness.

The worst excuse is human nature, since it is also human nature to act responsibly, as an occasional driver demonstrates by stopping at the stripe.

Here we have proof that Perot was on shaky ground when he recast the average American in the role of underappreciated, "down-home" sage. How can we be counted on to give mature consideration to solving the nation's problems when we have no qualms about risking someone else's life to save a few seconds on the drive home?

The answer is that we can't. We must recognize that merely "intending no harm," or even "meaning well" does not ensure that our personal goals and

behaviors, especially when multiplied by millions, are not actually or potentially harmful.

Today we face serious challenges to our collective ingenuity and community spirit. I suggest that when we begin to keep the space in front of the fire station clear, we will find those challenges easier to meet.

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Correction

Due to an editing error in last week's Valley Voices, one of JerriLyn Miller's recommendations on neighborhood safety was misstated. The correct sentence should read: "When rewards are offered, there's a better chance that someone will come forward with information regarding the perpetrator's identity."