

# Partial Pajaro Bridge closure sparks outrage

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WATSONVILLE — The thought of 34,000 vehicles a day being shoe-horned through two lanes of an already-congested Pajaro Bridge for two years elicits one response from local residents and business owners:

"What a mess!"

The four-lane bridge, a major artery connecting the Pajaro Valley since 1951, must be replaced due to extensive damage done by the 1989 earthquake. Repairs costing some \$75,000 were temporary measures.

Thousands who regularly cross the bridge know that traveling between Watsonville and the north Monterey County town of Pajaro already is difficult, as trucks and cars clog several blocks at each end during peak driving times.

Riverside Drive in Watsonville, a main connector for vehicles coming from Highway 1 to the west or

Highway 101 to the east, also jams regularly as trucks wait to cross the Pajaro River.

Locals are surprised and outraged as they discover that plans to rebuild a \$6.5 million bridge starting this spring are more than half complete.

Suzanne Viscovich, an employee at Clint Miller Farms, a large-scale strawberry grower, didn't know about plans to halve the number of lanes while structure is being replaced.

"Wow. What a mess!" she said. "At 5 p.m., it's like you're taking your life in your hands just trying to get onto (the bridge)."

The same went for Julie Rocha, office manager of C&N Tractors, a multimillion-dollar company that sells, rents and repairs farm equipment.

"That is ridiculous. That's horrible. Now traffic is a problem there,

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but that will really be a mess. That's people's way home, and a lot of businesses are located on that road because of the truck access," Rocha said.

Even the Pajaro Valley Chamber of Commerce's Executive Director, Bob Dwyer, didn't know about the lane reduction.

"Obviously the traffic backup down (Watsonville's) Main Street is going to be incredible," said Dwyer, adding that it already reaches from the bridge almost to the plaza.

But Monterey County officials are making no apologies, and say it is impossible to keep four lanes open while construction is under way.

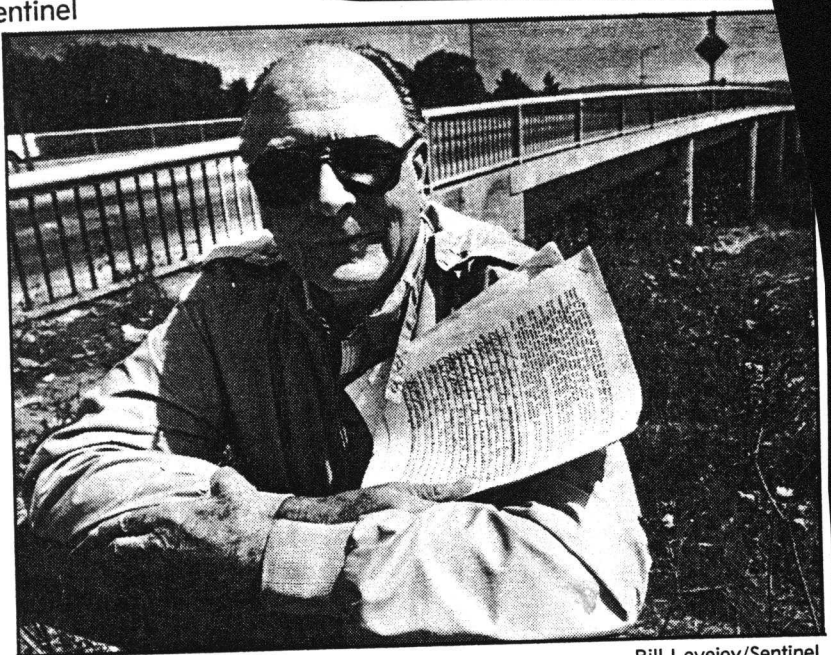
"Yes, it's going to cause congestion. Yes, there's no way to avoid that. People will have to find other ways to get around it, and yes, it'll be inconvenient," said Nick Nichols, deputy public works director for Monterey County. "It's unfortunate, and I wish there was a way to please the community."

But an alternative such as building a temporary bridge would cost up to \$2 million, he said.

Nichols said the present traffic problem began after the earthquake when the bridge's left-turn lanes were closed. Repairs to the bridge, including reopening those lanes, widening the bridge and improving traffic signal timers, should eliminate most of the tangle.

Even so, small merchants and multimillion-dollar corporations alike say lane closures will increase traffic and decrease business for two years.

Rosie Salcedo of El Nopal Bakery predicts customers who travel from San Jose, Gilroy and even Watsonville will no longer make a special trip to buy their homemade Mexican pastries and bread. John Cooper, sales manager of C&N Tractors, said he expects sales to drop at least 25 percent because trucks will be diverted south down Salinas Road before they can enter Highway 1.



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Don Buell hopes his petitions will influence the plans.

"Convenience and service is part of the game, and when you take away our convenience and slow down our service, that's not helping us any," Cooper said.

Pajaro property owner and former resident Donald Buell spent two full days circulating a petition against bridge plans and collected more than 100 signatures from Pajaro and Watsonville business owners and residents.

"Everybody I was talking to treated me like a savior of some kind. It was like something horrible that was going to eat them up," said Buell.

The petition asks Monterey County officials to keep four lanes open while they rebuild the old bridge, and to expand it to six lanes.

"Part of the problem I have with Mr. Buell and community efforts is if they succeed in helping the county and city find more funds to increase (bridge) capacity, changing the scope of the project now will send us back a year, maybe more, to make those changes. We're way late already," Nichols said.

Nichols also said that building six lanes would mean tearing down buildings and paying hefty right-of-

way costs on both sides of the bridge, where development almost abuts the bridge entrance.

Officials also denied keeping the public out of plans.

"I don't know what to say. They have held public hearings, but I guess until it happens they don't realize it. We live in a busy world," said Monterey County Supervisor Tom Perkins.

Because Monterey County is only half responsible for the project, Buell and others also plan to petition its partner, the city of Watsonville.

"I certainly think the whole community should be taking a good look at the impact this will have, and discuss it with the powers that be," said Dwyer. "That will definitely be on our agenda."

City Public Works Director David Koch said in addition to some \$400,000 being dedicated to the project through Measure E earthquake funds, Watsonville also received a \$211,000 grant to make lighting and sign improvements on the bridge. Presently, the city and Monterey County are trying to secure an additional \$460,000 to widen the bridge, which will allow for smoother traffic flow and provide bike lanes.