

Support for new HOT lanes cools off

Car-pool lanes could speed Highway 1 widening project

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CAPITOLA — It appears the county Regional Transportation Commission's opinion of HOT lanes has cooled.

However, regular car-pool lanes remain an option to widen the local stretch of Highway 1, especially if they could be used to put the long-debated project on the fast track.

Commissioners on Thursday considered a study that examined how feasible it would be

to widen the highway between Santa Cruz and Aptos with so-called HOT lanes, or high-occupancy toll lanes. The lanes allow motorists to skirt traffic by paying a fee and entering a special lane. Car-poolers and buses have access to the lanes, too.

Several commissioners expressed doubts about the HOT lanes, but ultimately decided to submit the study's first phase to planners involved in the development and construction of two similar projects in Southern California.

Those planners would conduct a peer review of the study. Another group would then recommend whether the commission should proceed with the study's next phase or shelve the project.

"Although I am not enamored with the idea of HOT lanes, I support the peer review ... given that we've gone this far," Commissioner Mardi Wormhoudt said. "There are people in the county very committed to this project, and I want them to feel it's been given its due."

But it appears due consideration may be all the project gets. Installing toll lanes, especially on only six miles of highway, would be unprecedented. Commissioner Dennis Norton said Santa Cruz County "doesn't need to be the pioneer on this."

"The roads West were littered with the bones of pioneers, and we don't want to be there," Norton said with a laugh.

Commissioner Jeff Almquist agreed.

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"I don't think people (here) are ready for that," he said.

Still, Almquist thinks rallying voter support for HOT lanes would be easier if they were more familiar with the toll bridge systems used by cities in the North Bay.

According to the report, only two of 56 possible HOT lane configurations were feasible: striped lanes with an entrance near Aptos and intermediate access between Soquel and 41st avenues, or striped lanes with continuous access.

Regular carpool lanes will apparently remain under consideration, however, in part because it's possible they could be useful in helping the commission use what is called a design-build method of construction, rather than traditional methods.

Design-build projects can speed the design and construction process.

Darryl Goodson of Watsonville-based Granite Construction Co., the third largest heavy construction company in the United States, explained the process, as did Los Angeles attorney Geoff Yarema and others.

Design build, or fast track, is a concurrent process in which a contractor, engineer and road owner work as a team. Project design and construction are done in tandem by a successful bidder rather than in several phases by different companies. Besides saving time, proponents of the method say it is 5 to 6 percent cheaper and has lower overhead costs.

The cost of the Highway 1 widening has been estimated at \$200 million.

Special legislation allowed toll booths in Orange County to be constructed with the design build method. Still, Caltrans does not yet have legislative approval to pursue the method. It is widely used in 11 other states.

However, the Santa Cruz Metro Transit District — the county's bus service provider — may have the authority to use design-build. Metro would benefit from the addition of carpool lanes, also called high-occupancy vehicles lanes or HOV lanes.

"An HOV lane with bus eligibility would qualify as what legislation defines as a 'transit improvement,'" Almquist said.

Given that, he said, a joint powers agreement between the commission and transit district could be forged.

"But before you go down that path, you want to make sure your analysis of the law is correct ... to be sure this qualifies," Almquist said.

A pilot project called design sequencing was approved by the state assembly in 1999. Different from design build, design sequencing allows each phase of a project to move ahead incrementally after it is designed.

With design sequencing, projects can be awarded when designs are only 30 percent complete, rather than the 100 percent required by conventional methods. Twelve pilot projects were allowed by assembly bills 405 and 2607.

In other action, commissioners deferred discussion on a possible 2002 ballot measure to fund the widening project to their May 16 workshop.

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