

Highway decisions delayed

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SANTA CRUZ — The Santa Cruz Regional Transportation Commission was expected to start making decisions Thursday on some tough traffic issues.

Didn't happen.

Once again, the commission delayed voting on a long list of options for combating congestion along the Highway 1 corridor, including the controversial alternative of adding lanes.

Instead, commissioners listened to about an hour of public testimony — mostly comments they've heard before — and then adjourned the meeting without discussing any of the options. A list of 50 proposals were on the agenda but the meeting was ended at noon because of time constraints.

Commissioners did, however, promise that action isn't too far off. They voted unanimously to hold a special meeting July 1 — all day long if necessary — to discuss only

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the highway improvement options.

The commission's lack of action angered some.

The commission spends a lot of time on insignificant issues but "not on the major transportation issue of this county," said James Conklin, executive director of the Santa Cruz County Business Council. Conklin said a decision may be closer than ever, but he was frustrated after the meeting.

The commission's regular meeting began at 8:30 a.m. but other business pushed the heart of the agenda to 10:45 a.m. From there, the commission briefly debated whether to take public testimony

and whether to impose time limits. Eventually, about 20 people spoke on both sides of the widening debate, without a time limit.

Five of the 10 commissioners have said they aren't interested in widening the highway unless other approaches are adopted at the same time.

Frustration reigned among many of the 50 people in attendance and among the commissioners ready to start making choices.

"We've had endless hearings already, studies and surveys, and this meeting we weren't supposed to have a hearing at all," said Commissioner Jeff Almquist, a county supervisor. "We were here to make a decision. We didn't."

Commissioner Mardi Wormhoudt, also a Santa Cruz County supervisor and an opponent of widening, supported the public's right to speak and requested the special July meeting. Commissioner and county supervisor Jan Beautz suggested the next meeting "go until we are finished," no matter how long public comment takes.

Several commissioners said they weren't enthusiastic about receiving more public comment since there already have been dozens of meetings on the much-studied subject.

At one point, Commissioner Bruce Gabriel interrupted while someone from the public was speaking.

"I think we have to close the hearing

and get this moving," said Gabriel, who represents the Santa Cruz Metro Transit District.

Almquist, who chaired the meeting, chimed in, "At this point we don't have the time to do that."

While the commission is considering a wide range of options, including rail service and improved bus service, most of the speakers focused on the widening option; most were opposed to it.

After the July meeting, where the list of 50 options could be whittled down to several, the commission is scheduled to set up at least one more public hearing, possibly in August. The commission could then make some final decisions.