

Highways Tragedy spurs Highway 9 safety drive

By TOM LONG
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SAN LORENZO VALLEY — The first road between this valley and the city of Santa Cruz was a mud-plagued toll road built in the 1800s. Planks were laid across the biggest potholes in the road, grading was done with pickaxes and horse-drawn graders.

Those were the first efforts to try to make what has become Highway 9 safe.

Now, with more than than 20,000 vehicles a day traveling along the winding, two-lane road, traffic safety has become a major concern for Valley residents.

In 1986, there were 173 traffic accidents along Highway 9. In 1987 that number grew by 19 percent to 206.

But it was one tragedy — the January death of Boulder Creek resident Florence Koth as she attempted to cross the highway to get mail from her mailbox — that set off the Highway 9 Safety Campaign.

"We had talked about it before, but it had never come up at a time when we could do anything about it," says Nancy Macy, president of the Valley Women's

Club, which is coordinating the campaign. "When Florence was killed we decided we should do something."

According to Macy, Highway 9 has some unique problems in that it is both a state highway and a neighborhood road.

"The road is frequented by joggers, pedestrians, domestic animals, wild animals," Macy says. "It's a neighborhood, it really is, and people who are driving have to be reminded of that."

And the people who need to be reminded, Macy points out, are not just tourists. The Highway Patrol estimates that 75 percent of Highway 9 accidents involve local residents.

"It's not like it's people from outside the county who don't know the roads," Macy says.

In fact, the driver of the car that hit Koth was a volunteer fireman heading to an emergency. The spot where she was hit, just north of Boulder Creek, was unlit and at the end of a curve. On the night of the accident there was no moon and drizzle was falling, fairly common conditions in here.

The driver, who was not charged with any crime after the accident and tried to

save Koth with CPR, said he never saw Koth until he hit her.

It was the kind of tragedy that could happen in many spots along Highway 9. And the kind of tragedy the campaign is hoping to stop.

The campaign, which has received \$2,000 in funding from the county Transportation Commission, was set in motion when more than 700 Valley residents signed a petition asking Fifth District Supervisor Joe Cucchiara to try to get some flashing yellow lights on the stretch of road where Koth was killed and to lower the speed limit there. Cucchiara had already contacted state officials in an effort to get some of the \$1.7 million that has recently been allotted for Highway 9 improvements pointed toward that area.

Since then, others have gotten into the act and the safety campaign has gotten under way. The campaign will include Highway Patrol officers speaking to students at local high schools and poster and slogan contests are being held at schools as well. T-shirts with reflective lettering on them are being designed as prizes.

But the point isn't just to reach kids.

The campaign is asking for artists to submit works that could be enlarged to billboard-sized reminders that will be strategically placed along the highway to promote safety consciousness. Any artist who has a submission accepted will be paid by the campaign to build the actual sign. Submissions may be made by contacting Macy at 338-6578.

More than 50 people have already volunteered to work on the campaign — identifying problem areas on the highway, establishing traffic watch groups to report dangerous drivers — and Macy expects even more to become involved.

The official kickoff for the campaign will be May 14, when the highway will be shut down from downtown Ben Lomond to Highlands Park and residents will make a "Walk For Safety" down the asphalt after a rally at Mill Street Park in Ben Lomond. All so the community might hear the campaign's message.

"The message is that there have been too many accidents, too many people killed," Macy says. "We have to slow down."