

Highways 7-14-94

Caltrans gets the hook from Sentinel readers

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SANTA CRUZ — The interchange of highways 1 and 17 should not be rebuilt, according to the majority of Sentinel readers who responded to Sunday's story about proposed changes to the interchange.

Out of 163 telephone responses, 82 readers said they didn't like either of the two designs by the state Department of Transportation or said they want the intersection left alone.

The interchange, which sports the infamous fishhook curve, is the gateway to the Monterey Bay Area. Citing safety concerns, Caltrans plans to begin rebuilding in 1997. But work could be put off if Gov. Pete Wilson has transportation projects delayed to retrofit freeways for earthquake safety.

In 1997 dollars, the two designs would cost \$45 million and \$50 million respectively. Some \$23 million has been budgeted for the project.

"I like the interchange the way it is now," said one caller. "Anyone wishing to commute to San Jose and

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have a home in Santa Cruz has to pay the price, otherwise, they should live where their work is."

"I really enjoy the existing configuration," agreed Fred Pino of Scotts Valley. "It is no problem as long as people start using their heads. They can all merge into (Highway) 1 with no problem.

"Hey, it slows people down. There have not been that many accidents. I was here when they put it in in 1958. For \$45-\$50 million, you can take your alternatives and put them in your bucket."

State figures, however, show this interchange to be the most dangerous freeway section in the county and the 18th most dangerous in the state.

Linda Wilshusen, executive director of the Santa Cruz Regional Transportation Commission, said the whole project could be scraped if that is what the community wants. But she isn't convinced this is true.

"People who are opposed to it are going to be the most vocal," she said in response to the telephone poll results. "What you have is not a representative response.

"Right now, we have \$23 million committed to the project. If the community doesn't want it, I'd be happy to find another project that the community wants. But it depends on what the California Transportation Commission would approve."

If the community doesn't want this project, Wilshusen warned, the state commission could decide to spend the money elsewhere.

Some callers felt the money could be better spent on libraries, education or mass transit. But Wilshusen said the money, which comes from the gas tax, can only be spent on transportation capital projects. This would include rail projects.

Many callers said the money should be spent on widening Highway 1, where traffic backs up as it comes off the interchange heading southbound on Highway 1.

"It is insane to spend that much money on the fishhook until they widen or do something about moving more cars down south. You are

only going to have more cars stack up. Caltrans should look at widening the road. The fishhook is not the problem. The problem is there is no place to go," said one caller.

Dennis Bosler, chief engineer on the project, said Highway 1 is a separate problem. It can't be widened, he said, until the interchange is improved.

"Widening Highway 1 wouldn't make the interchange's problems go away and would in fact worsen them because a greater volume of vehicles would feed into the interchange.

"When the highway now is congested, there are probably people out on the local streets. If the freeway is opened up, they will tend to migrate back to the freeway," he said.

Wilshusen said the interchange redesign is the first step toward widening Highway 1. Both designs would provide a third lane on Highway 1 southbound from the interchange to Morrissey Boulevard.

Callers who supported rebuilding the interchange preferred the so-called alternative A to alternative B, even though A will cost \$5 million more. Some 53 callers liked A, while 6 preferred B.

Alternative A would retain the present traffic flow from Highway 17 directly onto Ocean Street. Alternative B would create an intersection on Ocean Street extension for traffic headed into town from Highway 17. Traffic headed northbound on Highway 1 from Highway 17 would also go through the intersection.

"That will turn into a parking lot," said one caller of the new intersection. "Traffic will back up so far it will interfere with traffic trying to branch to Highway 1 northbound. I think tourists might find it discouraging to go to the beach area."

Another seven callers said they didn't like any of the designs, including the existing one, with some offering their own designs. Four callers said either alternative would do, while another 11 callers addressed topics indirectly related to the interchange, such as overpopulation.