

Toll lanes, more merge lanes in Highway 1's future

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Committee also OKs more buses countywide and selling electric bikes at discount ⁸⁻⁷⁻⁹⁹

SANTA CRUZ — Picture Highway 1 with an expressway in the two center lanes, where solo drivers would pay to avoid gridlock, where buses and car-poolers would travel for free.

Picture the treacherous Fishhook interchange nearly congestion-free, thanks to additional merge lanes on southbound Highway 1 to Morrissey Boulevard and northbound to Highway 17.

Those pictures could be reality in three to

five years after a historic vote Thursday night by the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission. While unanimously supporting expanded bus service and bike lanes, the panel also approved spending at least \$46 million for three to five miles of express lanes on Highway 1.

The majority of the commissioners say they still favor a more ambitious widening project eventually, a \$245 million concept

that received tentative approval last month. But they said they opted for the less-expensive toll road largely because they don't believe county voters would approve higher taxes to help pay the full tab.

The biggest winner Thursday night was the Metro Transit District, which picked up \$124 million for increased bus service countywide.

Commission Chairman Bart Cavallaro, a

longtime supporter of freeway widening, said the approved project list shows the commission understands that no single solution will fix the congestion along Highway 1 between Watsonville and Santa Cruz.

While implementing the major elements is at least three to five years away, Cavallaro called the votes the most meaningful in his 18 years on the commission.

"Based on the size and significance, yes, I

think so," said Cavallaro, a Scotts Valley councilman. "We've had lots of projects come through that were important to the region, but collectively this is the biggest and most comprehensive. In the future I think people will look back and see Santa Cruz County was realistic about this decision and not caught up in the 30-year mind boggle,

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which it had been up to now."

The commission's only split vote came on the toll lanes, which are planned for somewhere between Capitola and Santa Cruz. Details have yet to be worked out.

Cavallaro, Watsonville Mayor Oscar Rios, Transit District Board Member Bruce Gabriel and county Supervisors Jan Beautz, Walt Symons and Jeff Almqvist voted in favor of the new lanes.

Supervisor Mardi Wormhoudt, Santa Cruz Mayor Katherine Beiers, Santa Cruz City Councilman Tim Fitzmaurice and Capitola City Councilman Dennis Norton were opposed.

The commission also decided to support the following spending:

- \$50 million for local road improvements.
- \$15 million to buy the railroad right of way along the highway.
- \$25 million for bike-related improvements, such as bike paths along the railroad line.
- \$1 million to buy electric bicycles to be resold to the public at a discount.

The \$260 million total is within the commission's budget over the next 17 years, according to transportation commission staff. The bus system staff notified the commission last week that it has come up with \$53 million in grants to

The facts about HOT lanes

Q What is a high-occupancy toll lane?

A For the purposes of the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission, a toll lane means a separated express lane that single-occupancy drivers would pay to use, although car-poolers and buses could access it for free.

Q Where would it be built?

A It's unclear right now, but typical HOT lanes are built in highway medians. The Transportation Commission will have to determine how long a toll lane on Highway 1 would extend or where such a toll lane would be best utilized.

Q How do toll lanes work?

A The most likely scenario would be that customers would be issued an electronic device, known as a transponder, to be placed in their car.

As the vehicle enters a toll lane area, an overhead antenna would read the transponder and deduct the toll from a pre-paid account. Such a program is in use on Interstate 15 near San Diego.

Q What would it cost drivers?

A It depends on the length of the toll road and, possibly, the time of day. But, based on San Diego's toll-road rates, fees would range from 50 cents to \$4, with the highest rates charged during morning and evening rush hours. The toll cost would be posted on a sign before the entrance to a toll lane. Buses and car-poolers would have full access.

Source: San Diego Association of Governments; Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission; California State Department of Transportation.

help pay for improved bus service, and that amount was added to the overall transportation budget.

Staying within budget means the commission will not ask voters to approve a sales or gas tax increase.

Thursday's vote, however, was not the

end of the widening debate. In January, the commission took the first step toward a wider highway by agreeing to construct additional merge lanes at the Fishhook interchange, where highways 1 and 17 come together. That \$31 million project is scheduled to begin by Septem-

ber 2003 and will extend merge lanes to near Morrissey Boulevard on southbound Highway 1 and on the northbound stretch from the San Jose exit to northbound Highway 17.

The \$46 million approved Thursday night is enough to pay for between three and five miles of toll lanes on the 20-mile Highway 1 corridor. Cavallaro said additional state or federal money could be used to extend the length.

He and other commissioners said they remained confident the state Department of Transportation or Federal Highway Administration will match the commission money.

As explained by the commission staff, buses and car-poolers would have free access to the new toll lanes but solo drivers would have to pay as much as \$4 during commute hours, based on toll-lane charges in San Diego.

Jay Walter, district director for Caltrans, said a toll-lane study would take about 18 months. Topics include costs, environmental impacts and whether toll lanes would ease congestion.

Some commissioners believe additional lanes won't solve congestion and that toll lanes discriminate against the poor.

"I think the issue of (toll) lanes is really difficult," said Wormhoudt, a leading foe of widening. "A two-tiered system where people with money buy their way out of congestion is odious."