

# Sanctus 1589 Nightmare for commuters

By JOHN ROBINSON  
and KEITH MURAOKA  
Sentinel staff writers

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SANTA CRUZ — Even the patience of Job would have been tested Tuesday evening as the over-the-hill commute from the Santa Clara Valley took up to six hours for some drivers.

The lucky ones only sat in traffic on Highway 17 for three hours.

Those who chose Highway 9 entered a true commuter's nightmare complete with ghosts and goblins as trick-or-treaters and crowds of Halloween revelers in Boulder Creek contributed to a traffic jam that stretched for miles into the night.

Angry commuters filled mountain bars and restaurants, seeking a break from the traffic.

"I left San Jose at 5 p.m. and I'm

not even into Boulder Creek yet," Rondi Tallent of Scotts Valley said at 9:30 p.m. from a restaurant north of Boulder Creek. "I'm stuck in this bar and I don't even drink. It's absolutely insane. Traffic is barely creeping."

Rumors circulated among drivers that a Halloween parade had shut down the road causing the backup. Angry words were often exchanged between drivers passing

through downtown Boulder Creek and mountain residents out with their kids for Halloween.

Boulder Creek firemen said that there was no parade, but stores handing out candy drew large crowds of children which slowed traffic as they crossed the highway.

"I think the kids are welcome to it," Pamela Seabrook, a cook at Our Place outside Boulder Creek said. "I understand that they (com-

muters) have wives at home yelling at them because they didn't take their kids out for Halloween. I feel sorry for them. It's too bad traffic backed up. But that's the way life goes and I'm not particularly polite about it."

Highway 9 was the only direct route over the mountains into Santa Cruz Tuesday night after Highway 17 was closed to private cars at 7 p.m. Boulder Creek fire-

fighters said that most of the cars were single drivers.

Halloween was more than just a nightmare on Elm Street and Highway 9, it was a nightmare on every street for commuters.

Jim Bosso, a manager for the Santa Cruz Airporter, said that return trips from San Jose on Highway 17 took 2½ hours Tuesday

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evening as traffic backed up from The Cats Restaurant to Camden Avenue.

"The evening commute is OK as long as the CHP isn't (enforcing) the checkpoint for single drivers," Bosso said.

The ban on cars with only one person will be strictly enforced today, a CHP spokeswoman said.

Many commuters and private bus services attempted to avoid the traffic snarls by taking shortcuts through Los Gatos.

Cindy Smith, a Santa Cruz resident, left the San Jose Airport at 3 p.m. Tuesday. It took her 2½ hours to get home, even after using a shortcut through Los Gatos.

"I regretted leaving Santa Cruz. It was too much of a hassle getting back," she said. "Los Gatos was a real bottleneck. We were stopped about 50 minutes. It's just packed with cars trying to sneak onto Highway 17."

Such shortcuts have brought traffic to a stop in Los Gatos, forcing the police to close down the Santa Cruz Avenue onramp to Highway 17 starting today. The onramp will remain closed until the situation changes.

The closure of the ramp will put hundreds of more cars onto Highway 17, increasing the delays.

Traffic flow on most routes depends upon the time they are traveled with traffic the worst during peak rush hours. A San Jose CHP spokeswoman said that delays of 1½ hours on Highway 17 at 5 p.m. were reduced to 15 minutes by 6:45 p.m.

Commuters, however, said the wait was considerably longer.

Mary Schuldes, public affairs officer for the Highway Patrol in San

Jose, said the primary problem is simply "too many vehicles."

"There weren't that many solo drivers trying to get through that we had to turn back," she said. "The primary problem was too many vehicles as motorists are not taking the alternate routes."

"I don't know what we can do," Schuldes added. "We can't force them to take alternates. If they want to sit three hours, that's up to them."

The earthquake-damaged portion of Highway 17 between Scotts Valley and Los Gatos is open to only car pools of two or more persons in Highway Patrol-led convoys between 5 a.m. and 9 a.m., and 3 p.m. and 7 p.m., seven days a week. Trucks are allowed to cross in convoys between 8 p.m. and 4 a.m.

The only exceptions to the solo-driver prohibition are Summit-area residents, and buses and emergency vehicles, which are allowed at all times.

The restrictions were instigated at the request of the California Department of Transportation, which is attempting to clear numerous landslides left from the Oct. 17 earthquake. Caltrans hopes to have two lanes of the highway open 24 hours a day by Nov. 20, with a Dec. 15 target for it to be fully open.

Santa Cruz County Transportation Commission Executive Director Linda Wilshusen said it is imperative the landslides are cleared "before it starts raining."

"If it rains and those slides begin moving, it's (Highway 17) going to be closed all winter," Wilshusen warned.

Meanwhile, some Summit-area residents are fuming about having to wait in the long lines of carpoolers when they have readily vis-

ible passes that are supposed to give them free access to Highway 17.

"I don't see why they can't let us use the emergency-vehicle lane," said Minnick. "You see one van use the lane every 20 minutes or so, and the rest of the time it's empty."

But, Schuldes of the Highway Patrol said that isn't possible. "There isn't room for a special lane for (Summit-area) residents," she said. "We have to leave a lane open for emergency vehicles."

Highway Patrol Sgt. Ward Schuyler said Tuesday morning's commute ran smoothly from Scotts Valley. He said he noticed many cars with three and four occupants.

As mentioned, Highway 9 remains a viable alternate to Highway 17. Bear Creek Road, which cuts over to Highway 17 in Boulder Creek, has also been reopened, Wilshusen said.

Other alternatives include: Highway 1 north to Half Moon Bay and Highway 92 to Interstate 280; Highway 1 north to Highway 84 and east on Highway 84 to Interstate 280; Highway 1 south to Highway 152 in Watsonville to Highway 101; and Highway 1 south to Salinas Road and then to Highway 101 via San Juan Road.

Also, dozens of special buses continue to operate daily from a new park-and-ride lot at the former Santa's Village in Scotts Valley. The buses go to San Jose State University, the downtown San Jose Caltrain Depot and a park-and-ride lot at Camden Avenue and Branham Lane in southwest San Jose. Round-trip fare is \$2.

Some 126 passengers rode the special passenger train Tuesday from Watsonville to San Jose. One-way fare from Watsonville is \$3, with round trip costing \$4.50.