

# No free ride

As local transportation officials consider toll lanes to ease Highway 1 congestion, similar projects in Southern California have done little to solve the problem

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Highway

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## Southern California HOT lanes

■ Tolls range from 50 cents to \$4.25, with some tolls reaching \$8.

■ The average driver spends \$25 a month on tolls.

■ 58 percent of the Highway 91 toll lane users have annual incomes over \$60,000. In San Diego County, 40 percent of I-15 toll lane users earn over \$120,000.

■ The toll lanes absorb 11 percent of daily traffic but 40 percent of rush-hour traffic.

■ About 26,000 motorists use the lanes each weekday, 11 to 15 percent of whom are car poolers.

## Proposed Highway 1 HOT lanes

■ HOT lanes likely would run from State Park Drive in Aptos to the Highway 1-17 interchange, with only two access points.

■ Estimated cost is \$150 million to \$200 million.

■ Officials say it's likely that all taxpayers would be asked to foot the bill through an increased sales tax.

If Southern California's experience is any indication, Santa Cruz County's proposal to widen Highway 1 with toll lanes will leave most traffic-weary motorists feeling flat.

A Sentinel investigation of two high-occupancy toll-lane projects found the so-called HOT lanes have not delivered most motorists from traffic misery.

The investigation found:

■ While motorists can pay to bypass traffic, the Highway 91 toll lanes in Orange and Riverside counties and San Diego County's FasTrak system on Interstate 15 actually guarantee heavy traffic for most drivers. HOT lanes rely on congestion in the free lanes to convince drivers to open their wallets for the tolls.

■ Bottlenecks still plague Highway 91 due in part to the long lines of motorists trying to enter the toll road.

■ In San Diego County, a San Diego State University study found that while HOT lanes did increase use of the express lanes and generate money for bus service, they have not achieved a primary goal: easing overall traffic congestion.

Complicating matters, the affluent are the most frequent users of Southern California's HOT lanes, a thorny matter that could translate into political trouble in Santa Cruz County, since passage of a sales tax would likely be needed to fund the project.

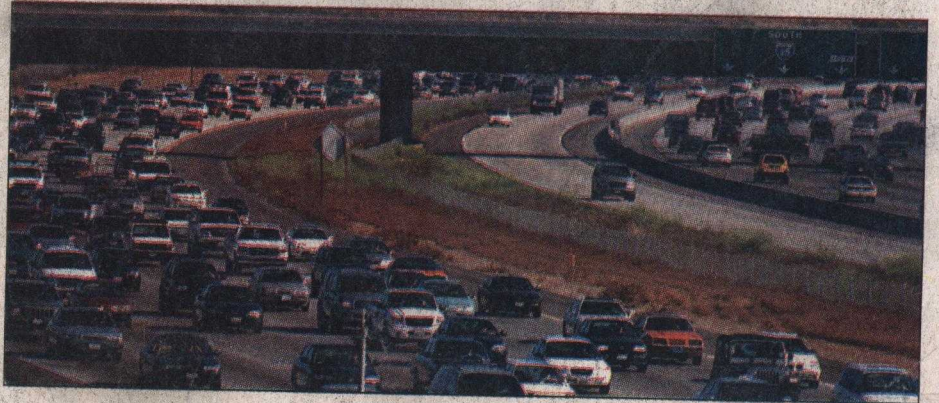
After years of debate about how to deal with growing congestion on Highway 1, the county Regional Transportation Commission in 1999 agreed to study HOT lanes from Santa Cruz to Aptos. Also on the table is widening the highway with car pool lanes or simply adding general-use lanes.

As many as 110,000 cars travel the highway each day, up 12 to 14 percent from 1995. State transportation officials have bestowed the highway with the worst possible ranking because of commutes that can take hours.

At an estimated \$150 million to \$200 million, the HOT lanes project would be the most ambitious public works project in county history.

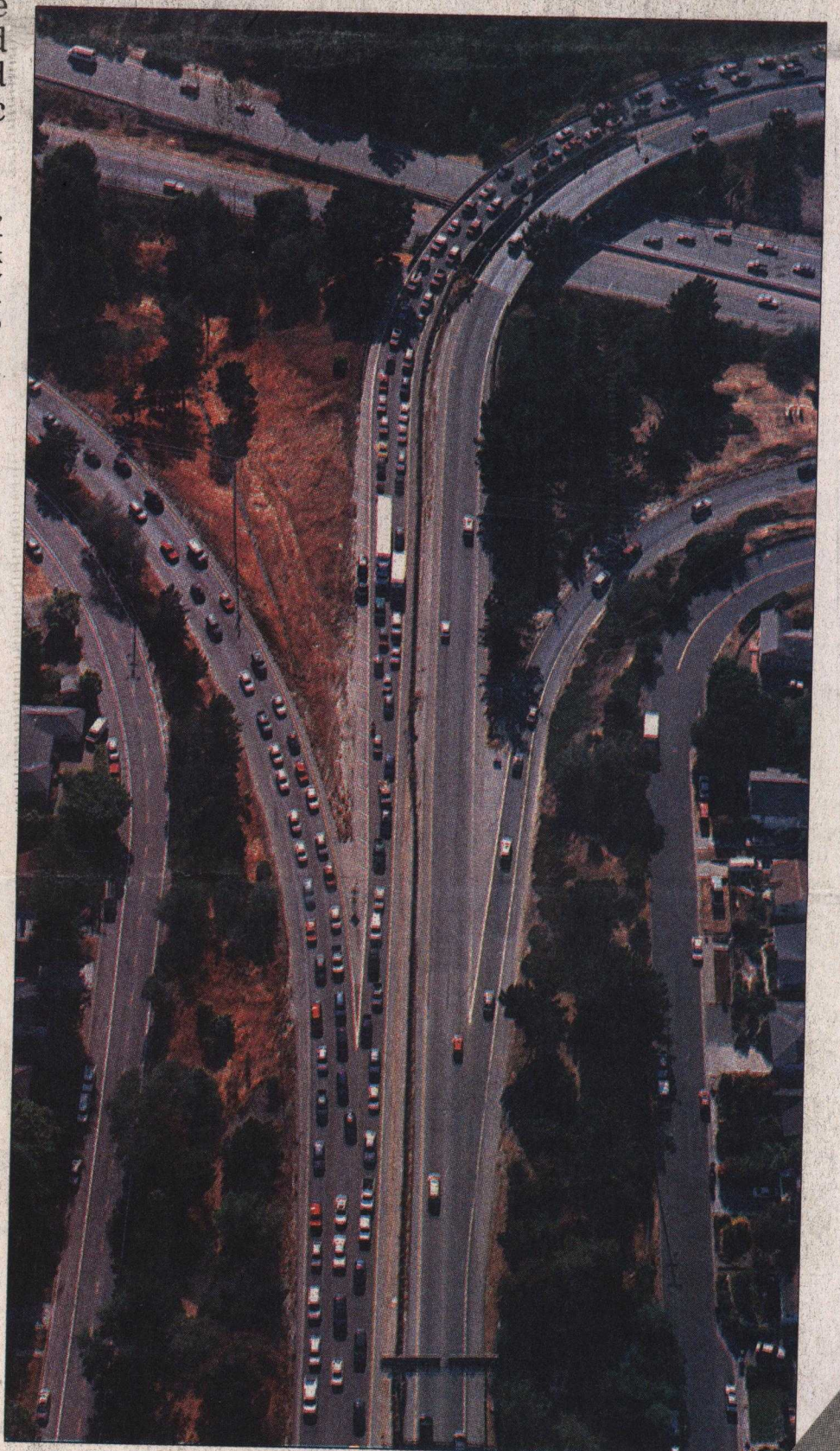
Meanwhile, drivers exhausted by sluggish traffic just want relief.

Please see **HOT LANES** on Page A8



ABOVE: The few drivers in the high-occupancy toll lanes breeze past commuters creeping along Interstate 15 near San Diego.

BELOW: Traffic from southbound Highway 17 merges with drivers from southbound Highway 1 at the Fishhook during the afternoon rush hour.



## Highway 1 congestion

A two-page color graphic illustrates the growing traffic problem on Highway 1 through Santa Cruz County.

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# NO FREE RIDE: A SPECIAL SENTINEL REPORT

## Highway 1 cogestion

About 86,000 vehicles travel past Aptos on Highway 1 each day. The busiest local section of the highway, from Soquel Avenue to Morrissey Boulevard, sees an estimated 110,000 vehicles a day. The highway is currently rated an F by the state Department of Transportation, the lowest rating a highway can receive based on traffic flow.

The county Regional Transportation Commission is considering widening Highway 1 with toll and car pool lanes in hopes of alleviating traffic congestion. At an estimated \$150 million to \$200 million, it would be

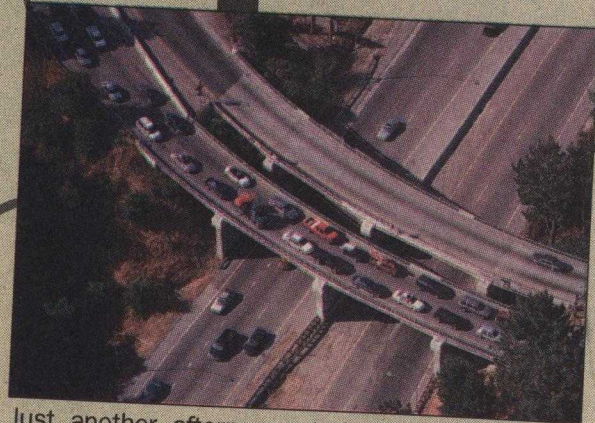
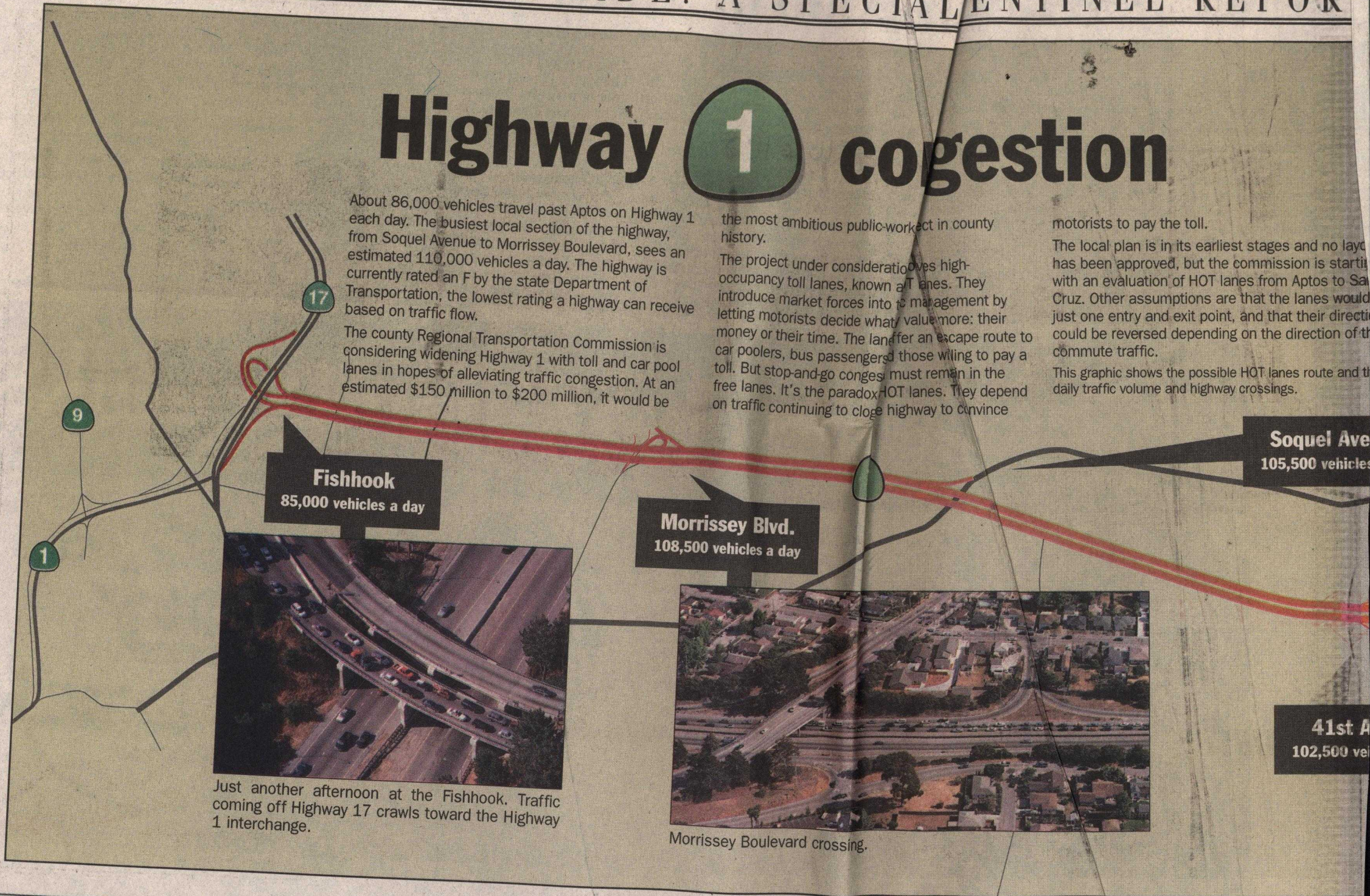
the most ambitious public-work project in county history.

The project under consideration involves high-occupancy toll lanes, known as HOT lanes. They introduce market forces into highway management by letting motorists decide what value more: their money or their time. The lanes offer an escape route to car poolers, bus passengers and those willing to pay a toll. But stop-and-go congestion must remain in the free lanes. It's the paradox of HOT lanes. They depend on traffic continuing to clog highway to convince

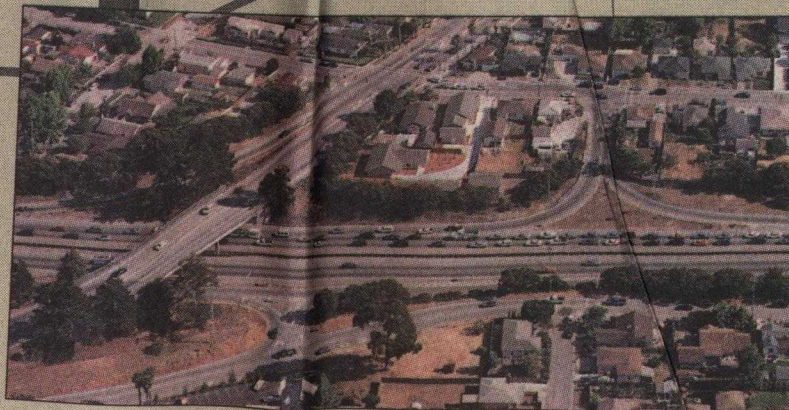
motorists to pay the toll.

The local plan is in its earliest stages and no layout has been approved, but the commission is starting with an evaluation of HOT lanes from Aptos to Santa Cruz. Other assumptions are that the lanes would have just one entry and exit point, and that their direction could be reversed depending on the direction of the commute traffic.

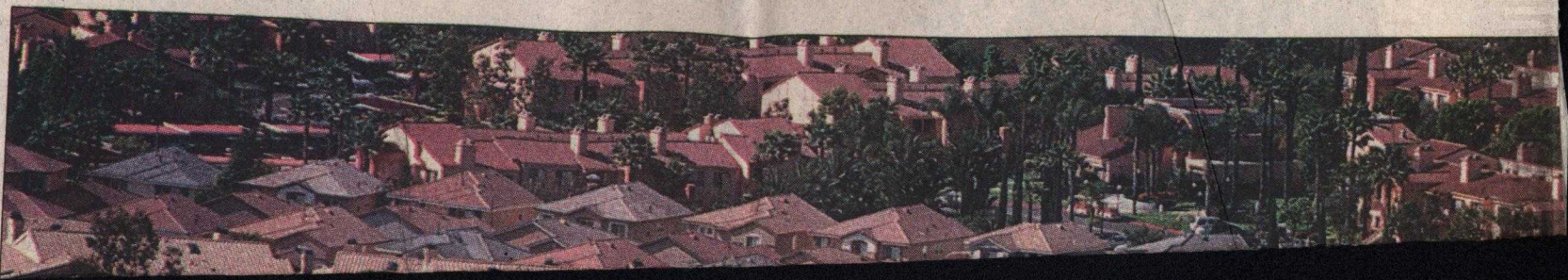
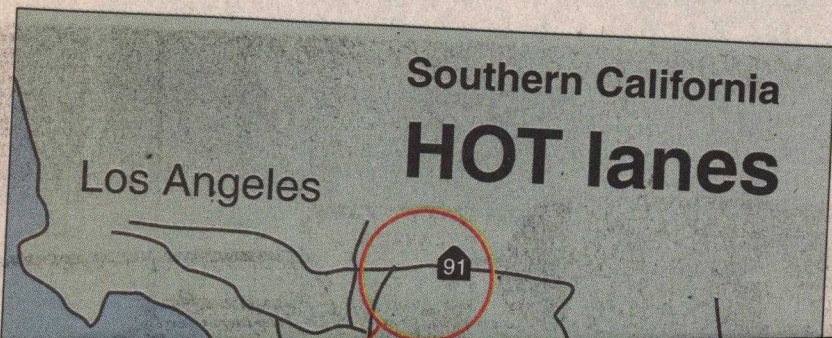
This graphic shows the possible HOT lanes route and the daily traffic volume and highway crossings.



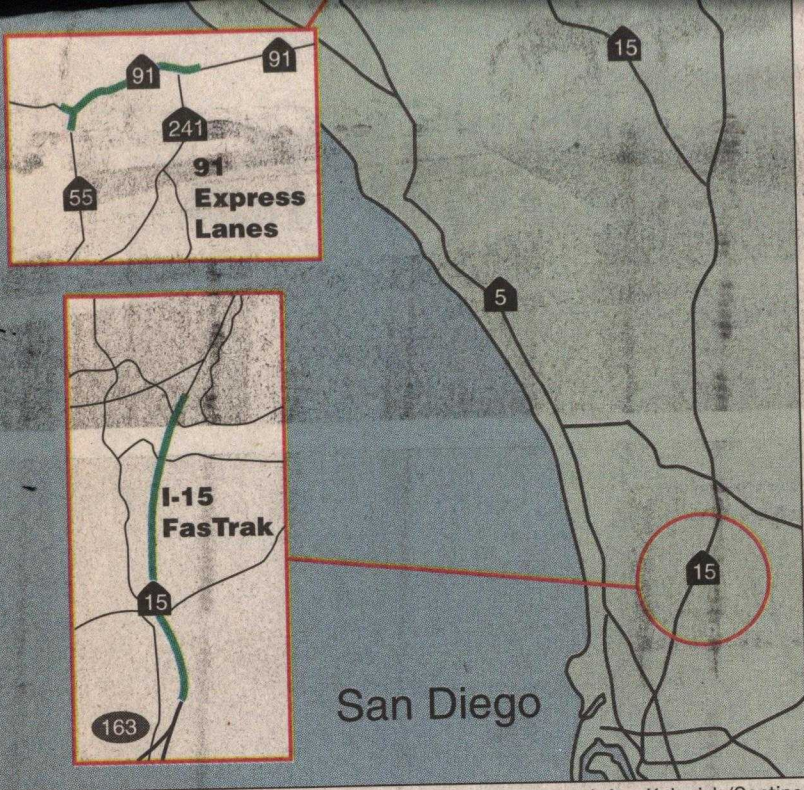
Just another afternoon at the Fishhook. Traffic coming off Highway 17 crawls toward the Highway 1 interchange.



Morrissey Boulevard crossing.







JoAnn Kolonick/Sentinel



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel photos

A single driver uses the Interstate 15 HOT lane during a recent commute in San Diego.

## HOT lanes: Most Southern California commuters are seeing little relief from tollways

Continued from Page A1

"It takes us 45 minutes to an hour to get to Santa Cruz," Soquel resident Lillian Enos said recently as she gassed up at the Union 76 station on Soquel Drive, echoing the frustration of many Highway 1 drivers. "Something has to be done."

### Traffic relief at a price

HOT lanes are a new concept in traffic control, and are based on "value pricing" to regulate traffic. The idea introduces market forces into traffic management by letting motorists decide what they value most: their money or their time.

HOT lanes offer an escape route to car poolers, bus passengers and those willing to pay a toll. For motorists in the free lanes, stop-and-go congestion grinds on. And that's how it's supposed to work.

As traffic in the free lanes increases, so do the tolls. HOT lanes function best when traffic is bad enough in the main lanes to convince motorists to open their wallets. But if too many people choose the HOT lanes, tolls rise to push some motorists back into the cheap seats.

In Southern California, tolls range from 50 cents to \$4.25, but can go as high as \$8. As a motorist enters the toll lane, a sensor reads an electronic device attached to a car's windshield,

deducting the toll from a pre-established account.

On I-15, tolls change every few minutes based on congestion in adjacent lanes. Tolls on the Highway 91 express lanes are pre-established but vary based on the time of day.

### Highway 91

The Highway 91 toll lanes run 10 miles along the center of the highway from the Riverside County-Orange County line to Anaheim. The four HOT lanes and eight lanes of general traffic make four-lane Highway 1 look like a goat trail. This is a Southern California freeway in all its bumper-to-bumper glory.

The 91 Express Lanes, which opened in 1995, were the nation's first HOT lanes. Since then, San Diego County and Texas have built HOT lane systems.

But being first hasn't been easy. Unlike public roads, the toll lanes are managed by the California Private Transportation Co. Investors, including Watsonville's Granite Construction Co., make the decisions that affect the road, not public agencies. This has led some, most notably Riverside County officials, to attack the lanes.

The 91 Express Lanes primarily serve Riverside County residents who drive to job-rich Orange and Los Angeles counties, where housing is more

expensive.

Until the transportation company turns a profit, estimated to be in 2006, car poolers pay half price. Once the company posts a profit, car poolers will ride free.

Part of the reason for the company's slow road to profitability are large, upfront debt payments, said Greg Hulsizer, company general manager. The project cost \$130 million.

While the HOT lanes make travel through Santa Ana Canyon faster, nightmarish commutes stack up east of the lanes as motorists line up to get on the toll road. Much like Highway 1, many motorists bypass the freeway and head for neighborhood streets in an attempt to escape chockablock freeway traffic. As a result, city streets and frontage roads are crowded, too.

### Public vs. profit

Corona resident Paul Bruno used to be a fan of the express lanes. As a former Illinois resident, he's used to paying tolls. But he has turned against the 91 Express Lanes because they're run for profit, not the public good, he said.

He and others point to a clause in the transportation company's 35-year franchise agreement with the state Department of Transportation that prevents the transportation agency from making any substantial road improvements on a 35-mile stretch of the free-

way that might ease traffic but reduce demand for the HOT lanes.

Although he now works at home, he said it used to take him 45 minutes to an hour just to get on the freeway, where another slowdown awaited him.

"The toll lanes do not alleviate congestion but guarantee congestion for the next 35 years," he said.

The city of Corona and Riverside County agree with Bruno. Corona officials filed a claim against Caltrans in May seeking \$100 million in damages for road maintenance and reduced police and fire response times as a result of commuters who crowd local streets to skirt Highway 91.

The city claims Caltrans' franchise with the toll operator blocks freeway widening that might unplug clogged traffic.

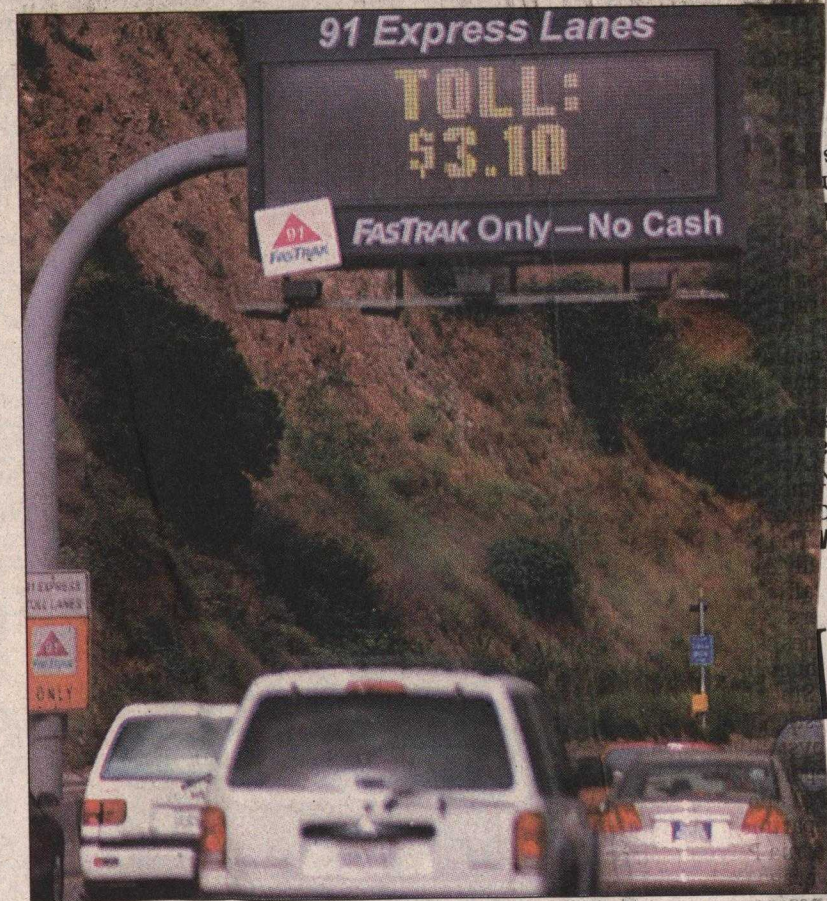
Riverside County filed suit against Caltrans over its deal with the toll-lane operator, and is seeking to open the HOT lanes to all and is pushing for freeway improvements.

The toll company says its franchise with Caltrans is fair, and that limiting freeway expansion is necessary for the success of the HOT lanes.

"It takes congestion for our roads to work," said Hulsizer, general manager for the toll company. "That's absolutely true."

But the HOT lanes offer motorists

Please see **HOT** on **NEXT PAGE**



Highway signs update the HOT lane toll according to traffic conditions.

*'It takes us 45 minutes to an hour to get*

LILLIAN ENOS



# ON THE PROPOSED HIGHWAY 1 TOLL LANES



Soquel Avenue crossing.



Seacliff/State Park Drive crossing. Rancho del Mar shopping center is at top left.

**Bay/Porter**  
102,000 vehicles a day

**State Park Drive**  
80,000 vehicles a day

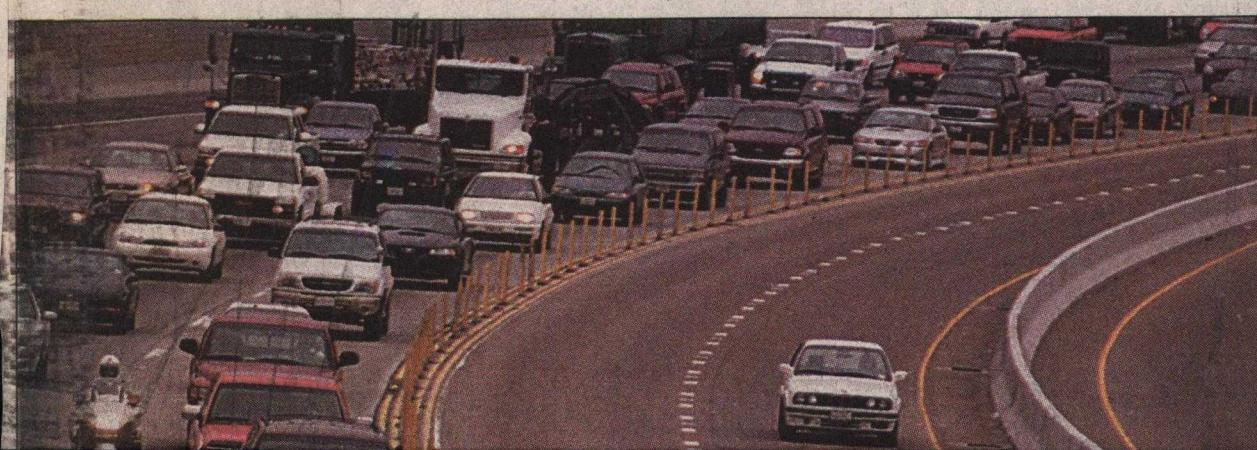


41st Avenue crossing.

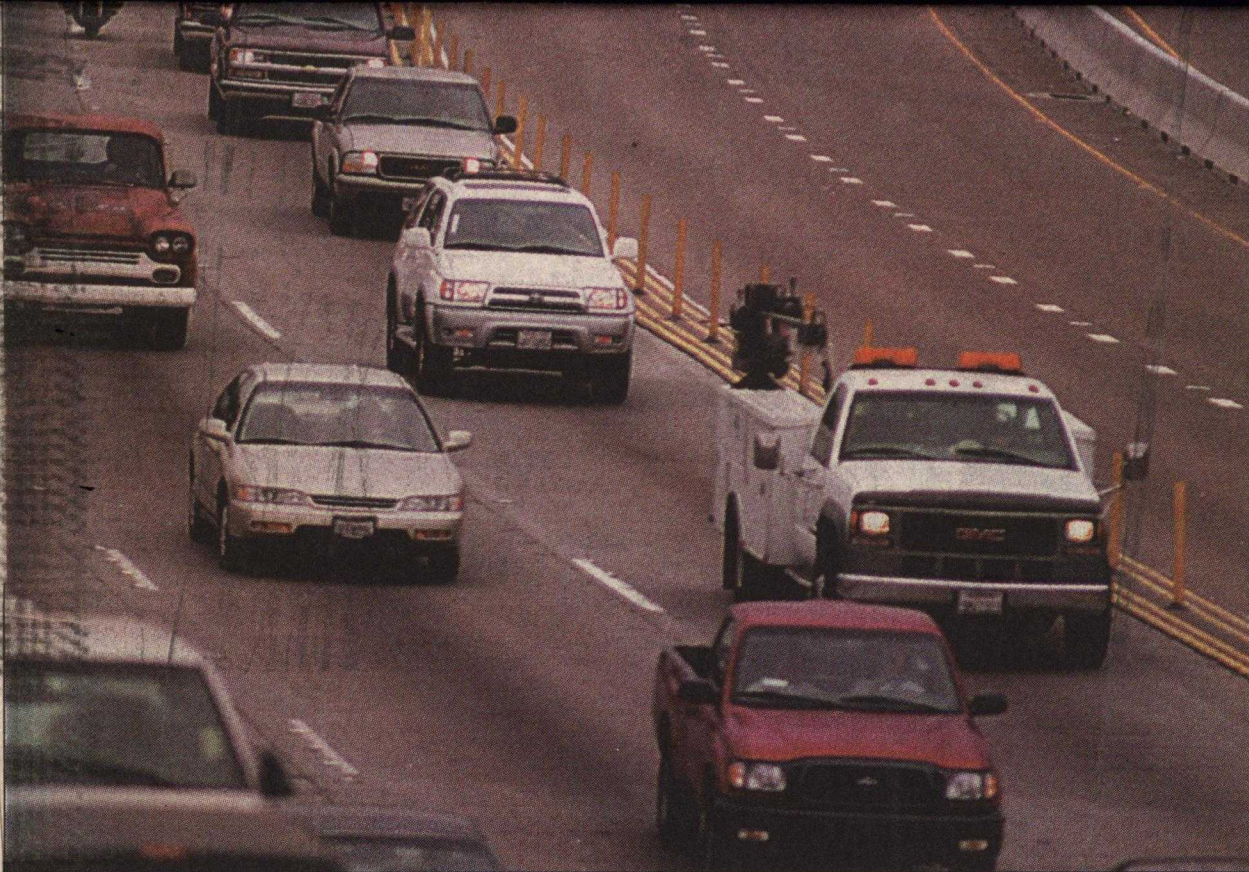
**Park Avenue**  
91,500 vehicles a day



JoAnn Kolonick/Sentinel graphic  
Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel photos







Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel photos

As commuter traffic backs up in the free lanes, a single driver speeds past in the 91 Express Lanes outside Corona in Riverside County.

## HOT: 'Lexus lanes' for rich commuters

Continued from previous page

for whom time is critical a way out of traffic, he said.

"We give them something they wouldn't otherwise have, and that's time," he said.

### Who uses the lanes

According to freeway statistics, commuters use the toll lane sporadically. The average user spends \$25 a month. The toll lanes absorb 11 percent of daily traffic but 40 percent of rush-hour traffic. Most customers are solo drivers. About 26,000 motorists use the lanes each weekday, 11 to 15 percent of whom are car poolers.

Since the toll lanes were added, congestion in the free lanes has gone from dismal to just bad. According to a report on the 91 Express Lanes by the civil and environmental engineering department at San Luis Obispo's California Polytechnic State University, average rush-hour speeds in the free lanes increased from 15 mph to 32 mph. That has translated into a reduction of

the morning commute from four to three hours. The afternoon commute is longer.

Given Southern California's seemingly endless capacity for growth, Hulsizer said traffic would be much worse today without the toll lanes. HOT lanes are no panacea but they make the best of a bad situation, he said.

"All you can do is make things incrementally better," he said.

Hulsizer said the continuing congestion is a reflection of the job and housing imbalance between Riverside and Orange counties. Until the imbalance is corrected, the toll lanes offer commuters a way out, he said.

Express lane users come from all income groups. But not surprisingly, the most frequent users have higher incomes, leading some to dub HOT lanes "Lexus lanes."

The Cal Poly study found 58 percent of rush-hour commuters in the toll lanes earn \$60,000 to \$100,000 or more.

Larry Slagle, manager of a Yellow Cab Co. in Anaheim, lives in Riverside.

He said the toll lanes do not save him enough time to justify the expense.

The bottleneck east of the toll lanes, the inability of Caltrans to expand the road and the cost of the toll also make it difficult for him to attract and retain drivers.

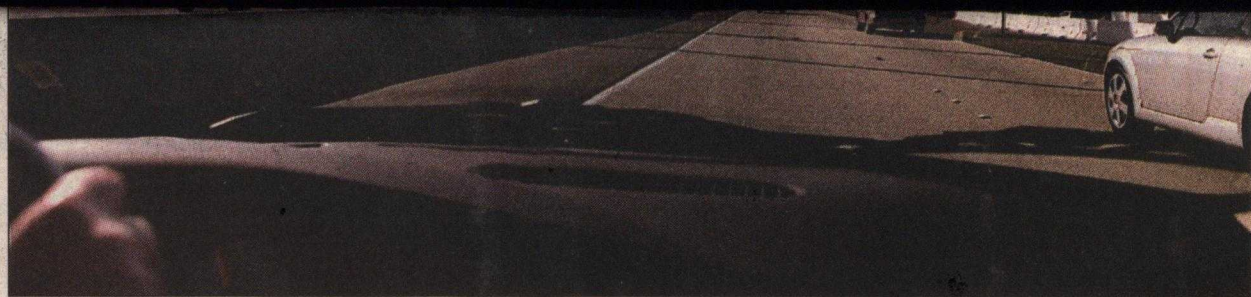
"The majority of working people can't afford it," he said.

### Interstate 15

San Diego County's HOT lanes stretch eight miles, between Poway and Escondido. Fighter planes and military helicopters buzz the road as they land at nearby Miramar Naval Air Station.

Like Highway 91, San Diego County's HOT lanes serve residents in more affordable outlying areas commuting to work in central San Diego. The toll lanes pass seemingly endless vistas of stucco and red-tile roof housing developments, home to many of the commuters that crowd the freeway.

Barry Newman is just the kind of commuter the toll lanes are designed



TOP: Drivers cruise along on Interstate 15 HOT lanes near San Diego.

ABOVE: Traffic backs up on Highway 91 near Anaheim as a sign entices drivers into the toll lanes.

to attract. He drives from his home in Escondido in northern San Diego County to his job as a lawyer in downtown San Diego.

"I've used it from the beginning," he said.

Because he is self-employed, arriving to work on time is less important to him than a stress-free commute. When traffic stacks up, he heads for the toll lanes.

"I know that I'm going to get there without stop-and-go driving," he said.

But because of the cost, he limits his use of the I-15 toll lanes to two or three times a week.

While Highway 91 HOT lanes have eased overall congestion somewhat, the San Diego County version has not.

The two reversible HOT lanes were originally built for car pools but were lightly used. As traffic in the adjacent lanes worsened, motorists grew angry

at the sight of empty road and urged officials to open it up to more drivers.

The San Diego Association of Governments sponsored the HOT lane project. Since the road already had the car pool lanes in the median, the HOT lane project cost only \$9.9 million. Car pools of two or more travel for free.

The HOT lanes were built to accomplish four goals: increase the use of the express lanes, help relieve congestion in the main lanes, fund new transportation improvements, and test the use of congestion pricing. According to a 2000 San Diego State University report on the HOT lanes, the project accomplished all but one goal: reducing congestion in the main lanes.

Construction of car pool lanes on nearby Interstate 5 and continued housing construction appears to have canceled any congestion relief on the main lanes, the report says.

The SDSU report concludes: "With continued growth along the I-15 corridor, the project's ability to relieve traffic on the I-15 main lanes may well prove to be an unrealistic goal."

Rancho Bernardo resident Jean Litzenberg would agree.

She uses the toll lanes when she is taking someone to the airport or has to arrive on time but generally avoids them because the line to get onto the HOT lane can be as long as slogging through traffic on the free lanes.

"It defeats the purpose," she said.

Brian Pessaro, associate regional planner with the San Diego Association of Governments, said he was not surprised the HOT lanes didn't reduce traffic in the main lanes.

"There's only so much you can do," he said.

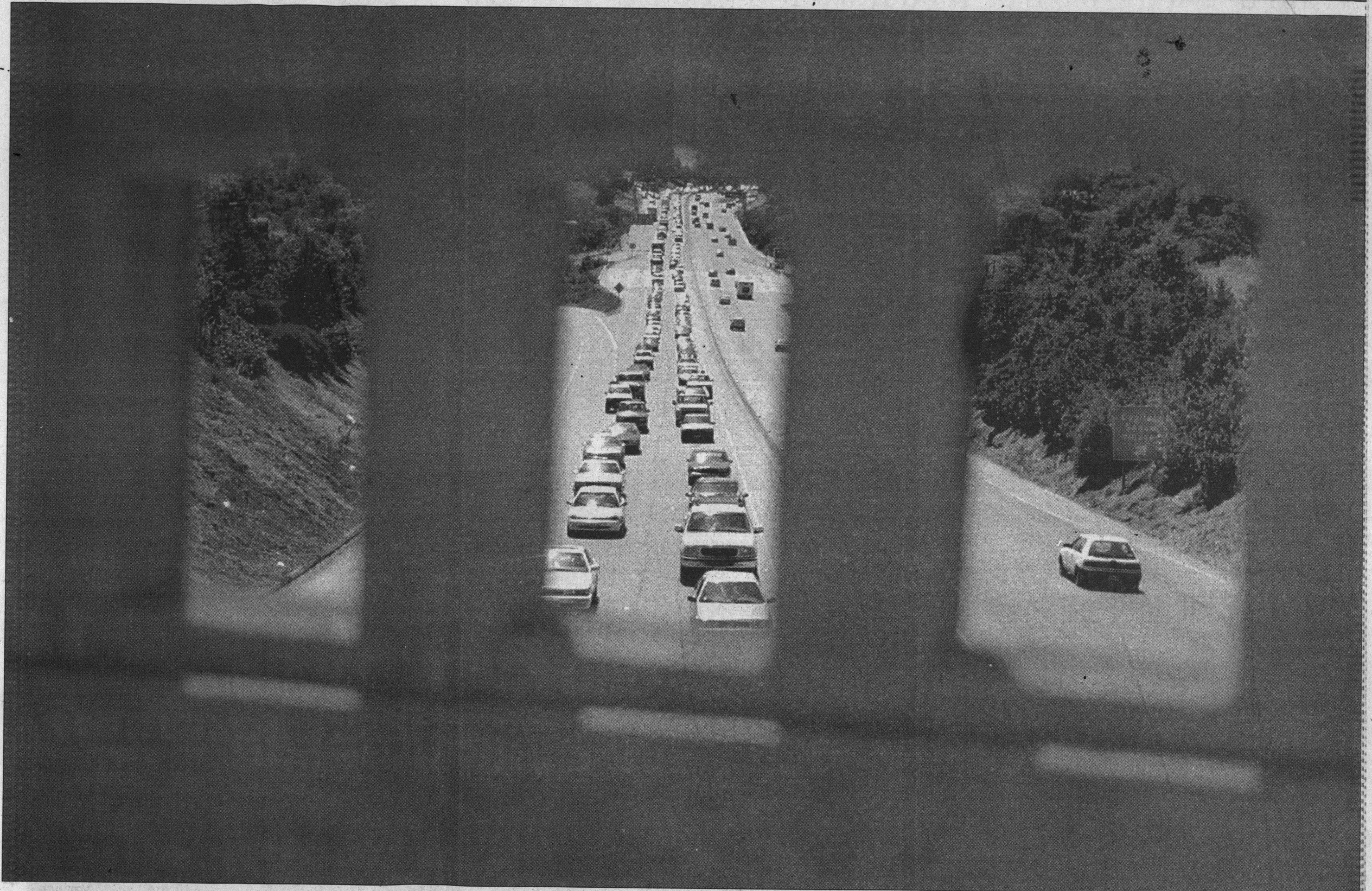
But he called the project a success. Please see **HOT LANES** on Page A10

o Santa Cruz. Something has to be done.'

DUQUEL RESIDENT



# NO FREE RIDE: A SPECIAL SENTINEL REPORT



The southbound Highway 1 commute, seen from between the rails of the Capitola Road overpass, stretches bumper to bumper toward the horizon.

Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel photos

## HOT lanes

Continued from Page A9

because it gives solo motorists an option they didn't have before and toll revenue helps pay for an off-site bus service. He called the toll lanes a "perfect" supply-and-demand project.

**La Selva Beach resident Tim Outtrim logs an average of 175 miles a day driving around the San Francisco Bay Area. While his employer would probably pick up the tab for the toll, he is**





said.

These income levels are slightly lower than when motorists were charged a flat monthly fee to use the toll roads. Now motorists are charged each time they use the toll lanes.

Unlike the HOT lanes in Orange County, car pool users on I-15 greatly outnumber solo drivers. Seventy-five percent of the vehicles are car pools.

## Local residents divided

HOT lanes would probably not be under consideration in Santa Cruz County if it were not for the efforts of Janet and Michael Singer. The Santa Cruz couple became transportation watchdogs after they discovered a flaw in a major study by the county transportation commission. Contrary to the study, they showed that widening Highway 1 with car pool lanes would save travel time.

They encouraged transportation commissioner and county Supervisor Jan Beautz to get the transportation commission to explore HOT lanes. Later, they steered the commission toward a federal program that is helping pay for the project study.

The Singers have been critical of what they call the commission's lack of enthusiasm for widening and HOT lanes. The Santa Cruz County Business Council, a consortium of business leaders that supports highway widening, hired the couple to monitor the transportation commission's work on highway expansion.

But the Singers don't see toll lanes as a cure-all. Given the amount of traffic in the county they say HOT lanes are an attempt to make the best of a bad situation. But widening is the only way to ease congestion and pull some motorists off adjacent streets back onto the highway, they say.

"If you can make (HOT lanes) work, fine," said Janet Singer. "If not, do car pool lanes."

The feasibility study under way will address how well HOT lanes on Highway 1 would work, access points and what improvements would need to be made to the highway to accommodate the project. In the meantime, local motorists are divided on the toll lanes.

Enos, the Soquel resident who spends 45 to 60 minutes driving to Santa Cruz, supports the idea if it makes life easier for commuters.

"Anything that would alleviate the traffic for the workers," she said.

Happy Valley resident Jeffrey Caspary would rather see more mass transit created than highway widening, but he likes the idea of creating a car pool lane even if it also charges a toll.

"I'd gladly pay the toll," he said.

Nokia employee and La Selva Beach resident Tim Outtrim logs an average of 175 miles a day driving around the San Francisco Bay Area. While his employer would probably pick up the tab for the toll, he is against the idea because he thinks it would discriminate against those who can't afford to pay.

## Wait and see

Santa Cruz County officials are taking a wait-and-see approach to HOT lanes on Highway 1.

Jeff Almquist, chair of the county transportation commission and county supervisor for the San Lorenzo Valley, said he's intrigued by the value-pricing concept but has his

against the idea because he thinks it would discriminate against those who can't afford to pay.

doubts about the "geometrics" of HOT lanes on Highway 1.

Because the lanes would run just over six miles, he wondered how many people would use them. And some residents would be locked out of the lanes because they would likely have just one entrance and exit, he said. Allowing multiple entry and exit points would detract from the unencumbered flow that makes the lanes attractive in the first place, he said.

But he is untroubled by the economics of HOT lanes.

"If people want to pay to get somewhere faster, let them pay," he said.

He said the biggest value of the toll lanes would be providing access to car pools, buses and emergency vehicles.

While he is skeptical about HOT lanes on Highway 1, he said the feasibility study would likely result in some form of widening.

"After that, there'll be no other obstacle to doing something," he said. "I feel like it's an artery that needs to be opened up."

Linda Wilshusen, executive director of the transportation commission, likes the idea of user fees attached to car travel. Except for getting caught in traffic and buying gas, there is little cost associated with congestion, she said.

"The more you pay as you go, the more you're aware what transportation costs you," she said.

She said the toll lanes would serve commuters who live south of Aptos, but said they would do little for bus service since few buses travel the highway.

But Wilshusen, long an advocate of local passenger rail, said she is withholding judgment on HOT lanes until the feasibility study is done. And she said any highway improvements must be part of county transportation plan that includes bus service, bicycle routes and other modes of travel.

## The 'Lexus lanes'

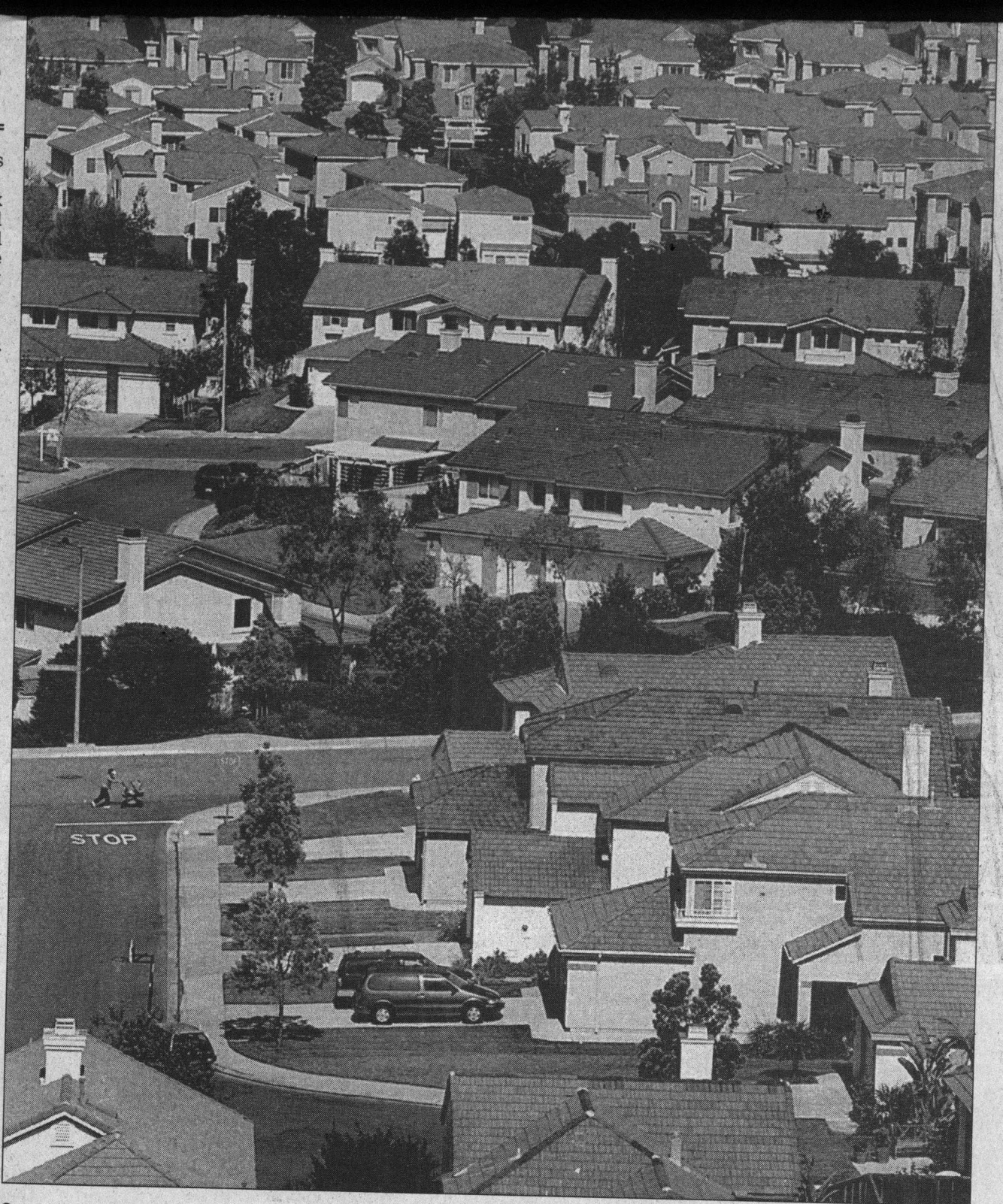
The transportation commission's biggest critic of HOT lanes is Commissioner Mardi Wormhoudt. Wormhoudt, also a county supervisor, says the term "Lexus lanes" fits. "I don't like them," she said. "They're elitist."

She also doubts HOT lanes will work given their short length and the fact that residents of Live Oak, Capitola and Soquel heading to Santa Cruz or over Highway 17 would be not have convenient access to the lanes since the entrance would likely be at State Park Drive.

As for alternatives, her suggestions are not likely to give gridlocked commuters much solace. She advocates better bus service and maybe rail service one day.

In the meantime, Highway 1 congestion is expected to get a lot worse. According to a transportation commission study, time spent in traffic is forecast to increase 119 percent from 1990 to 2015. During the already sluggish rush hour, travel time is projected to increase 250 percent.

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Sprawling development around San Diego has inundated the city's freeways with traffic.