

Commute study flawed

Highways
Widening
Highway 1
may ease
traffic jams
after all

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10/28/98

SANTA CRUZ — Adding lanes to Highway 1 would reduce traffic congestion — contrary to the findings of a \$800,000 study — but it took a determined Santa Cruz couple to help figure that out.

An error in the Major Transportation Investment Strategy — paid for by the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission and completed in August — led to the study's original finding that widening the local stretch of Highway 1, which handles 100,000 cars a day, would only add to traffic congestion.

Transportation officials acknowledged the new figures add up to a reduction in traffic, but a slight one.

The errors will mean only a "slight variance" in the report's findings, they said. But others were more critical.

"The corrected calculation shows that adding car pool/bus lanes to Highway 1 is the only alternative that shows promise for relieving congestion on both the highway and on the neighborhood streets around the highway," said Janet Singer, a Westside resident who discovered the errors.

Singer and her husband Mike have been constant observers and vocal critics of the study conducted by Parsons Brinckerhoff. They even held a Santa Cruz City Council candidates forum in August with the Mission Street Business Association.

According to the Singers, bus and car pool lanes would improve auto travel time up to 28 percent, whereas the original report stated widening would increase travel times by as much as 18 percent.

Linda Wilshusen, executive director of the Transportation Commission, credited the Singers with alerting the commission to the mistake, but said the couple overstated their findings.

"... It is a problem, but not as much as they say it is," Wilshusen said. "In some cases, you are talking about a couple of minutes" saved in a commute.

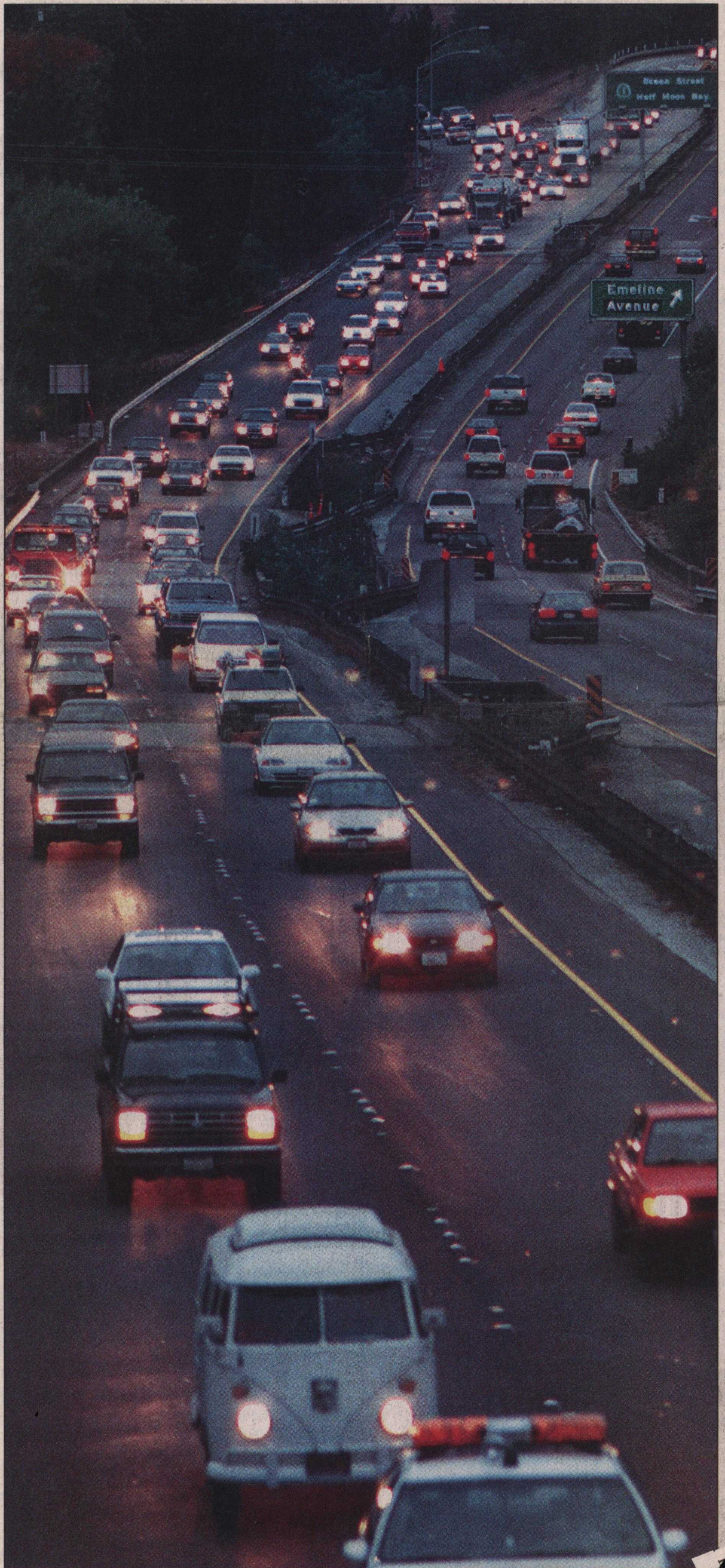
She said the corrected figures will make little difference in commission discussions. "This is one piece of information in volumes and volumes of information."

The study's eight alternatives for improving the 20-mile corridor from Watsonville to UC Santa Cruz included a \$100 million combined

Please see TRAFFIC — BACK PAGE

While Transportation Commission executive director Linda Wilshusen agrees there were errors in a report on easing Highway 1 traffic, she believes the corrected figures won't make much of a difference. Others disagree.

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Traffic

Continued from Page A1

bus route, bikeway and weekend train service, a \$280 million widening, and a \$384 million rail line to UCSC.

Any alternative would require a countywide half-cent sales tax, although consultants concluded the widening and train to UCSC would not be feasible. Transportation officials, meanwhile, are hoping more inexpensive means can be found.

On Nov. 5 Caltrans will make a presentation to the commission about Highway 1 widening and other freeway options, including car pool lanes, ramp metering and interchange improvements.

Wilshusen said the report's error happened in a section of the study that included projections and assumptions, not factual data. She

said the new information is only a slight variance on what already had been reported.

Bart Cavallaro, commission chairman and a Scotts Valley City Council incumbent up for re-election Nov. 3, said he was irritated by the error.

"I just got this information over my business fax with no explanation whatsoever ... Heck, we paid this consultant hundreds of thousands of dollars," he said Tuesday. "I'm surprised staff didn't catch it. There are checks and balances."

He said it was hard to predict how the correction would affect future commission discussions about different transportation choices. "It may have a ripple effect," he said. "How extensive, I don't know."

The commission will not have to

pay the consultants any more money to fix the error, Cavallaro said.

Highway 1 is important to local commuters because it is the main highway in and out of Santa Cruz and South County, and is used by many of the estimated 25,000 to 30,000 commuters who also travel Highway 17 each day. But more importantly, Singer said, it is her belief that widening Highway 1 also will relieve traffic problems on neighborhood streets.

She said the errors prove that widening is the answer.

"What happens in Santa Cruz is there is an assumption that if we don't fix the roadways, people won't drive the cars," said Singer, who doesn't drive a car and walks and rides a bus every day. "Widening the highway will take cars out of the neighborhood."