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Earthquake 1989 - Santa Cruz County

Landslide clogs commute

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SANTA CRUZ — At least things were getting back to normal for commuters.

A new landslide on Highway 17 closed the mountain pass for nearly two hours* Thursday morning, snarling traffic and backing it up for miles. The Highway Patrol, which has been leading convoys of motorists over the earthquake-damaged highway, temporarily suspended the convoys.

Santa Cruz County Transportation Commission Executive Director Linda Wilshusen said motorists should use special buses and the train that has been pressed into action for over-the-hill commuters.

"This closure serves as a reminder that it is not business as usual for our transportation system," Wilshusen said. "The carrying capacity of the road network is severely constrained, and will continue to be constrained until all major thoroughfares are fully operational."

Highway 17 is still restricted to vehicles with two or more persons between 5 a.m. and 9 a.m. and 3 p.m. to 7 p.m. weekdays. The Highway Patrol is leading convoys of cars at maximum 35-mph speeds. However, car-pool restrictions will not apply over the weekend.

Thursday's evening commute was delayed for more than an hour in Los Gatos as the Highway Patrol was faced with monumental lines of cars, Wilshusen said. Highway 17, the primary roadway for an estimated 23,000 local commuters, is expected to be blocked for three to four weeks.

Traffic congestion continues on the Santa Cruz side of the hill as Highway 1 through Santa Cruz and

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*— Linda Wilshusen,
transportation commission director*

mid-county resembled a pre-quake evening rush-hour — meaning bumper-to-bumper traffic from the fishhook at highways 17 and 1 to around 41st Avenue in Capitola.

Intra-county commuters had been enjoying free-flowing movement on Highway 1, Santa Cruz County's most-traveled roadway with an average 86,000 vehicles a day, thanks to partially-closed Highway 17. Traffic from Highway 17 onto Highway 1 had been greatly reduced due to the Highway Patrol's two-person car-pool convoys during commute times.

Apparently many commuters are either back to work, back to those bad driving-alone habits or are not heeding advice to take alternative modes of transportation to work.

Traffic in Watsonville, particularly where Highway 152 (Hecker Pass Highway) comes into Airport Boulevard, has been backing up for several miles as motorists seek another route to San Jose. Traffic on Highway 152 is about six times more than normal, as is equally windy Highway 9 through the San Lorenzo Valley, the Highway Patrol reported.

California Department of Transportation officials estimate that the Highway 1 closure in Watsonville at Harkins Slough bridge will take 8-10 months to rebuild. Motorists

are now being detoured at Green Valley Road, but a temporary frontage road detour is under construction. Once that is completed, traffic will be detoured to San Andreas and Beach roads rather than through Watsonville.

Meanwhile, special buses, cooperatively operated by the Santa Cruz and Santa Clara County metropolitan transit districts, are running 18 times daily weekdays beginning at 5 a.m. from Scotts Valley's park-and-ride lot at the former Santa Village enroute to the downtown San Jose Caltrain depot. During Thursday morning's commute, only 29 persons boarded the seven buses, said Bruce Kosanovic, public and community relations director for Santa Clara County Transit.

While that number is about equal to what one bus would carry, it is about double the passengers of Wednesday, he said. Seven special buses from Scotts Valley to a park-and-ride lot at Camden Avenue and Branham Lane in San Jose carried 19 passengers up Wednesday and 26 back.

Two additional park-and-ride lots have also been temporarily opened locally. They include a vacant lot off Whispering Pines behind the Unocal service station on Mount Hermon Road in Scotts Valley, and

the Capitola Beach shuttle lot at McGregor Drive adjacent Highway 1.

The special Caltrain service, which originates in Salinas and stops at Watsonville's station on Salinas Road at 6 a.m. weekdays, is also gradually increasing ridership. There were 89 passengers from Salinas, Watsonville and Gilroy Thursday morning, Kosanovic said. That's up from 70, 44 and four the three previous days.

From Watsonville, Caltrain services IBM in south San Jose. From San Jose, Caltrain services numerous peninsula points enroute to San Francisco. This is the first time passenger-rail service has returned to Watsonville since 1959, when the former Sun Tan Special went out of business.

Despite the lower-than-hoped-for ridership on both buses and the train, transportation officials have their fingers crossed that ridership will continue to increase. An advertising campaign is planned next week, Kosanovic said.

"It (bus service) will continue at least through next week," he said. "As long as Highway 17 remains partially closed and we're being used, we'll continue it. If we feel it's just not being well utilized or the road conditions on 17 improve, we'll evaluate it."

Scott Galloway, general manager of the Santa Cruz Metropolitan Transit District, called both the buses and train "highly subsidized service." He noted that bus service from Scotts Valley to San Jose is \$2 one-way, while train service from Watsonville to San Jose is \$3 one-way or \$4.50 round trip.

For information about the added bus routes over the hill, call 425-8600. For Caltrain information, call 1-800-558-8661.