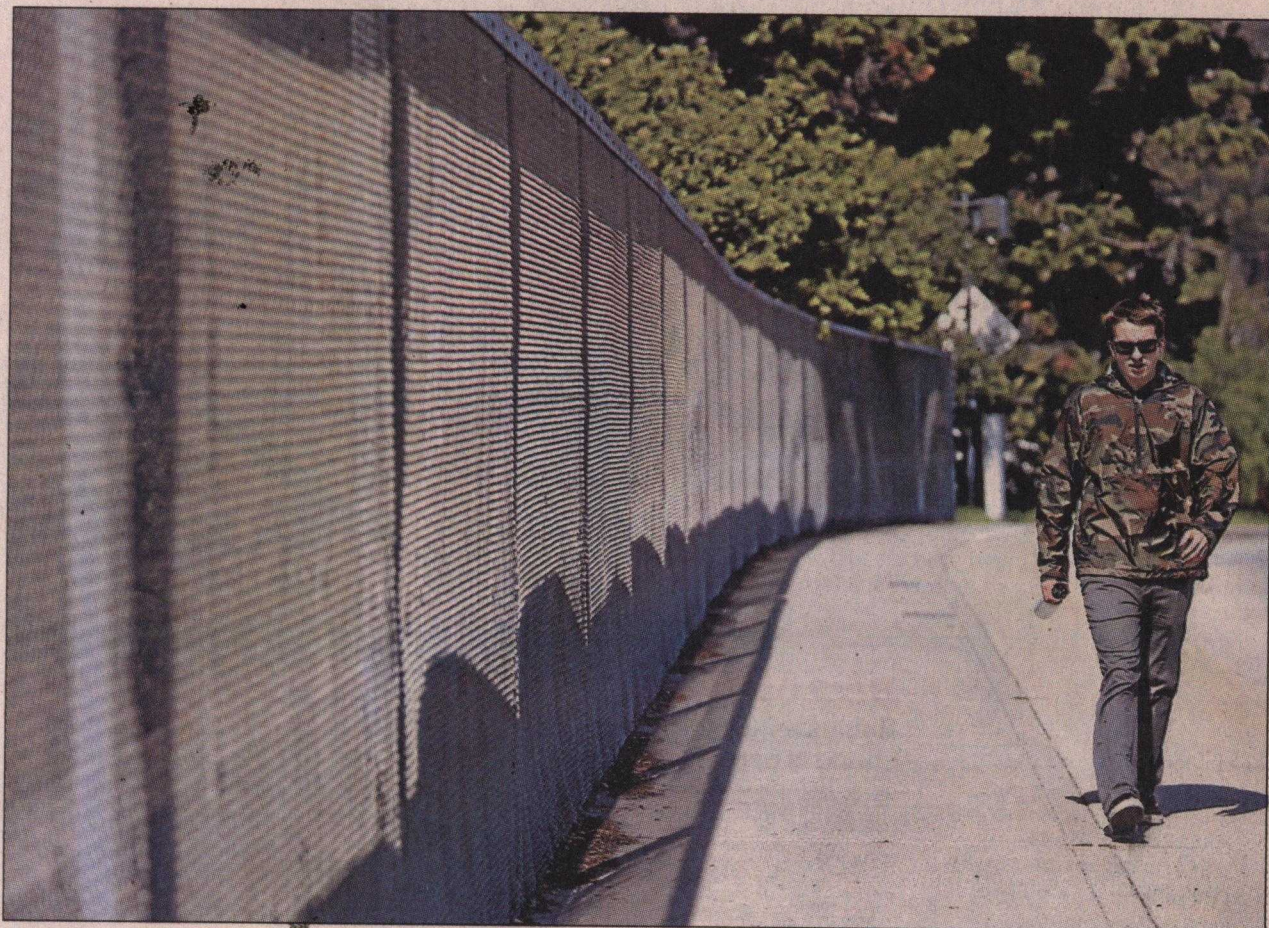


SANTA CRUZ COUNTY TRANSPORTATION 2.0



PHOTOS BY KEVIN JOHNSON — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

A young man walks along the sidewalk on the Morrissey Boulevard overpass in Santa Cruz on Friday. The county's Regional Transportation Commission hopes to get people out of their cars and into alternative modes of transportation.

transportation 2.0 \$2.7B plan to lay groundwork to change how locals get around

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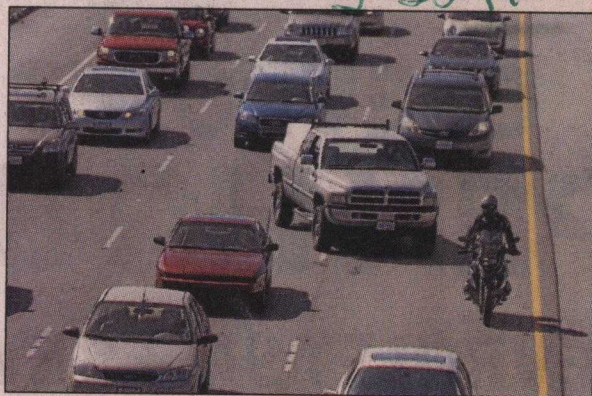
SANTA CRUZ » For all of their environmentally conscious, socially responsible chatter, Santa Cruz County residents still, by and large, get around town by driving in cars, usually alone.

But for the first time, a new \$2.7 billion county transportation plan aims to put a serious dent in local travel habits, pouring hundreds of millions of dollars into alternative transportation while still trying to shore up shortcomings

of the current system, from crumbling local roads to exasperating Highway 1 traffic jams. By 2035, the county's Regional Transportation Commission hopes to meet state-mandated greenhouse gas reduction targets by laying the groundwork for a change in how people live and work.

"We're in a transition state right now," RTC Executive Director George Dondero said. "We're trying to transition into a place where we're producing significantly less CO2 than we are now if we want to help the climate. This is kind of

PLAN » PAGE 4



Traffic crawls across Highway 1 in Santa Cruz on Friday during rush hour. The \$2.7 billion transportation plan aims to provide alternative forms of transportation, while also changing local travel habits and repair crumbling roads.



On the Net: To read the Regional Transportation Commission's long-range plan and explore an interactive map of projects, visit SANTACRUZSENTINEL.COM and click on this story.

Plan

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the first step toward that."

The plan is updated every five years, but this one incorporates the Sustainable Communities and Climate Protection Act of 2008, which sets climate goals for every region in the state. It also relies on two big questions marks — twin tax measures to be voted on in 2016, raising \$390 million over the life of the plan.

The measures are a \$10 vehicle registration fee and a ½-cent countywide sales tax, though a similar local transportation tax failed in 2004. Dondero said he hopes the state Legislature lowers the threshold for passage to 55 percent before the votes, and said if the measures are rejected, the picture is grim.

"I would predict that many of the rural local roads would be reverting to gravel over the life of this plan, which is 22 years," Dondero said. "I understand it sounds optimistic to build a plan with revenue you don't have, but we're not the only ones in the state doing this. A lot of counties are doing this. And the reason we're doing it is we have this mandate from the state to make greenhouse gas reductions. Well, you have to make investments to do that."

The plan balances many competing interests, with every constituency having a good argument that more money is needed.

Everybody Drives

Highway 1 traffic woes are well-documented, but Santa Cruz County also has the second-highest number of bicycle accidents per car mile. The condition of its roads are among the worst in the state, and fewer than 3 percent of commuters use public transportation to get to work, according to the U.S. Census Bureau figures, one of the lowest figures in the Bay Area and another symptom of traf-

fic gridlock.

It is not all bad news. The county has one of the highest percentages of stay-at-home workers in the state, and nearly 9 percent of local workers either walk or bike to work, also near the top among California counties. The planned 50-mile Monterey Bay Sanctuary Scenic Trail is a central part of the plan, which incorporates numerous other bike and pedestrian projects to encourage those modes of transportation, but also improve health and accommodate an aging population.

Amelia Conlen, director of the bicycling advocacy group People Power, said the organization supports the plan. While praising high-profile projects such as new Highway 1 bridges for bicyclists and pedestrians, Conlen said there also needs to be room for smaller projects that make biking more comfortable for people, such as painting bike lanes a different color.

"From our perspective those smaller treatments are just as important to making the overall bike (system) work," Conlen said.

The plan also pushes Highway 1 auxiliary lanes out to State Park Drive in Aptos, extending work that now stops at Soquel Drive. That work is highly sought by South County representatives on the Regional Transportation Commission, with the idea that Highway 1 needs more work now appearing to be the prevailing view of the commission.

"The fact that it's within the plan is right," said county Board of Supervisors Chair and RTC commissioner Zach Friend, whose district runs between Capitola and Watsonville. "It's what I think is necessary to relive some of the pressure that's in the southern portion of the county."

"We've really got to come with a reality check that people drive their cars," said county supervisor and RTC commissioner Bruce McPherson, who also praised the plan for projects in his district, such

2035 TRANSPORTATION PLAN

Public comments on the Regional Transportation Commission's 2035 long-range plan are due April 8. To learn more, attend one of the following public meetings.

Santa Cruz: March 25, 2:30 p.m., City Council chamber, 809 Center St., Santa Cruz.

Watsonville: March 25, 6:30 p.m., City Council chamber, 275 Main St., Watsonville.

Santa Cruz: March 26, 5 p.m., County Commission on The Environment, county board chamber, 701 Ocean St., Santa Cruz.

Capitola: March 27, 7 p.m., City of Capitola, City Council chamber, 420 Capitola Ave., Capitola.

as the beginning of the bike and pedestrian San Lorenzo Valley Trail along Highway 9.

According to the Census Bureau's American Community Survey, four of every five workers in the county use cars to commute, and of those, 88 percent drive alone.

Local Projects

The plan also increases funding for local road repairs, and Supervisor John Leopold, whose district runs from Live Oak to the Summit, praised it for balancing numerous needs. He also commended the RTC for using data not only to come up with the plan, but to assess how well it's working once put into place.

"There's something in it for everyone to love, and there's something in it for everyone not to like," Leopold said.

While transit programs garner most of the plan's spending, that is largely due to a ½-cent sales tax that goes to Metro Santa Cruz. Metro General Manager Les White said he was disappointed the plan doesn't foresee construction of new HOV lanes on Highway 1 to free up

north-south bus traffic, something RTC officials say is too expensive to pursue immediately. White and Metro Transit District Chair Dene Bustichi both want to see the rollout of electric busses, though the idea is still in the exploratory stage.

Without HOV lanes, White said, "You're just throwing more money into services that are stuck in the same traffic as everybody else."

The RTC also is studying commuter rail along the 32-mile Branch Rail Line, something Bustichi questions. There's no room for trains to pass each other, costly track upgrades likely are required and even then the train would run at very low speeds, he said.

"I just don't see this rail line being a feasible solution for us in the future," Bustichi said.

The plan also raises questions about land use, potentially signaling the beginning of a broader assessment of the region's restrictive development rules, such as strict limits on building heights. The rail corridor in particular might need double tracks, park-and-ride lots and high-density developments to work, something neighbors will have to grapple with.

"If you don't do that, you're not going to have the kind of (ridership) that you want to make the system effective," White said.

Perhaps the most surprising thing about the plan is that \$2.7 billion isn't enough. In 2012, the county's roads were rated seventh-worst in the state. The plan pours well over \$100 million into local road improvements over 22 years, but a recent assessment by the League of California Cities said more than a half a billion is needed over the next 10 years.

As RTC Commissioner Randy Johnson said at one recent meeting: "We need dollars, and pennies are coming down in terms of funding."