

Accidents triple on Fishhook approach

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SANTA CRUZ — Restriping at the Fishhook, turning two merge lanes into one, may help reduce accidents at one spot but has greatly increased the number of accidents elsewhere.

Statistics from a three-week period following the restriping show the accident rate tripled on the two-mile section of northbound Highway 1 from Morrissey Avenue to the interchange.

Also, according to a California Department of Transportation report, new congestion is occurring between 41st Avenue and Soquel Avenue, most likely caused by the increased lane changing at the Fishhook.

"Safety has improved ... in the areas of the Fishhook ramp that had accident concentrations, however, the accident rate has increased in the weaving area be-

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tween Morrissey and Branciforte avenues," wrote Caltrans in a report to the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission last week.

The review was conducted over a three-week period from March 29 to April 22.

Caltrans reports 17 accidents with seven injuries on northbound Highway 1 between Morrissey Avenue and the Fishhook. On average, there are about 45 accidents per year along that highway section. At the current rate, there would be more than 200 accidents in the upcoming

year.

Safety at the Fishhook merge has increased because the dangerous left merge lane from northbound Highway 1 onto Highway 17 toward Santa Cruz was eliminated. That lane merged almost directly into the onslaught of traffic. The right lane, however, gradually merges into traffic and remains in place.

There were no accidents on the Fishhook merge lanes in the three-week time period.

The average merge-area accidents in one year is 13, with five injuries; there are an average of 21 accidents on the Fishhook curve.

Merge-lane driving is also safer due to slower vehicle speeds, going from an average of 35-45 mph before the change to

10-30 mph after, according to the Caltrans report.

Transportation Commissioner Katherine Beiers, the Santa Cruz mayor, said she would like to see the time of day of the accidents and who is involved in them.

"We'd like to know if the accidents are locals or newcomers," Beiers said. "If they are local they would have figured out the system by now. The testimony we received from people seems to be they finally feel safe (in the merge) and I would hope we see a settling down of the accidents (before the Fishhook)."

The state highway folks are expected to make a final decision on the changes by May 31. They say the project is still in its "adjustment" period and the high acci-

dent rate between Morrissey and the Fishhook should decline as drivers get used to the change. County transportation officials said weaving traffic and rear-end accidents did gradually decrease once drivers got used to the change.

Rush-hour drivers no doubt notice the increased gridlock, which usually begins near 41st Avenue. But despite the frustrations that gridlock causes, it won't be a reason to undo the changes, Caltrans says.

Accident rates will be the primary factor in making a final decision, the highway department said. A determination is expected to be made May 31 and presented to the transportation commission at its June 3 meeting.