

# Highways Highway 9 set to open by Friday

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FELTON — Security guards have had their hands full keeping hikers and bikers off a four-mile stretch of storm-damaged Highway 9 south of Felton, while the state Department of Transportation works to re-open the road by Friday — just in time for Memorial Day weekend.

Since a section of the highway collapsed Feb. 12 in heavy rains, the road has become a haven for pedestrians and bicyclists taking advantage of the smooth pavement winding through tall redwoods.

"We put signs up everywhere asking people to stay away because this is a dangerous operation and we don't want anybody to get hurt," said Oscar Malparpida, resident engineer for Caltrans. "People would just bypass the signs and me when I asked them to stop, so we hired security guards about two weeks ago."

No arrests have been made, he said.

Malparpida said the road repair is a complicated project that uses techniques pioneered in Switzerland, where highways wind their way through mountains.

"We're using a large crane to dig the foundation for heavy steel posts in the mountainside that will hold an 80-foot-long, 8-foot-wide steel net that will be able to catch boulders that could come down in a slide," Malparpida said.

Crews also are laying down a grid of plastic material between layers of soil where the slide took place to stabilize the soil and prevent future slides.

"We're out there working seven days a week, putting in 12-13 hours a day trying to stand by our commitment to the community to get this job done by next Friday," Malparpida said.

Tim Heer Jr., who lives in Paradise Park south of the road work, is one bicyclist who has enjoyed the peaceful stretch of Highway 9.

"It was nice riding without the traffic, and not having the fear that some fool racing down the hill is going to hit you," he said. "I'll miss it being closed, but I understand it's a necessary roadway."

Bicyclists have trouble on the highway, he said, because there is no shoulder between Paradise Park and the train trestle.

"It gets really narrow through there and it's dangerous. Some drivers are more considerate than others, but there's always the exception to the rule," he said. "It was a nice escape for a while."

Meanwhile, motorists who have detoured to Graham Hill Road, where repaving has caused delays of 30 minutes, are counting the days until Highway 9 is opened.

Mark Christensen, who lives in Santa Cruz and teaches at San Lorenzo Valley High School in Felton, has been driving the only alternate route left — Highway 17 to Scotts Valley, and down Mount Hermon Road.

"It gets a little stressful if I forget about the road construction and go the wrong way," he said. "I got in a huge traffic jam on Graham Hill once."

The repaving of Graham Hill is expected to be complete today, and striping will take two to three days, said Phil Sousa of the



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos

Construction crew is rebuilding a chunk of roadbed under Highway 9 that slid out during the winter storms.

county Public Works Department. Minor delays will continue for up to two weeks for sewer manhole work, said Paul Rieth of the Scotts Valley Public Works Department.

Felton merchants at the south end of town whose business have suffered since the highway closed also are anxious to see traffic once again.

"Yeaaaah...." said Nancy Johnson, who owns a Quik Stop with her husband, Greg. "I'm glad it will be open for Memorial Weekend. If the weather's good, it can be an extremely busy weekend. We're hoping for a lot of tourists, because tourists spend money."

She's thankful for patronage of local residents. "People read in the paper that our businesses were suffering because of the road closure, and have been coming down here just to give us business. It's really nice," she said.

If Highway 9 re-opens as scheduled May 22, it will close for an hour the following day — from the entrance of Henry Cowell State Park to the intersection of Graham Hill Road — for the "Felton Remembers" parade, which begins at 10:30 a.m.

Traffic will be re-routed through back streets of Felton, said Melanie Lingscheid, chairman of the Felton street fair that will continue throughout the day.

Joyce Elmore, parade organizer, said she hopes the opening of Highway 9 will bring people up to the fair. "We had about 4,000 people here last year and we're hoping for at least that many this year."

The temporary road closure doesn't worry Shelly Peck, who is organizing the Third Annual Arts and Crafts Festival in Boulder Creek for May 23-24. "Our event starts at 11 a.m., a little bit later than theirs," she pointed out.

With Roaring Camp planning a Civil War reenactment for those two days, "it's going to be a busy weekend," she said.



Workers on the near-vertical cliff above the road hoist equipment.