

'When you put this thing in, it will look like a colossal mistake'

Neighbors oppose Fishhook changes

Highway
Area residents protest scope, cost of project

By NANCY CHIN
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — A revamped Fishhook will not be completed until 2003, but Ron Clegg can see it now.

"When you put this thing in, it will look like a colossal mistake to everybody," he said. "It will look so out of place it will be nonsense."

Clegg, 48, a contractor who lives in Santa Cruz near a proposed sound wall, was referring to the planned

improvement of the Highway 1-Highway 17 interchange. Construction is to take three years and begin in 2000.

On Sunday, he gathered with several of his neighborhoods in the wooded back yard of his Plymouth Street home. Clegg's one-bedroom, two-story house is set about 150 feet back from the street — which runs adjacent to southbound Highway 1 near Ocean Street. Plants and trees alongside the highway muffled traffic noise.

"Neighborhoods need to band together to stop this," said Eloise Graham, 56, who owns a house next to Clegg's. "We're at the beginning of a grass-roots movement."

Please see FISHHOOK —A12

What do you think?

■ Questions or comments about the Fishhook project? Contact Nancy Chin by calling 423-6397, selection code 6040. Or send e-mail: cruz-box@aol.com. Or send letters to Backseat Driver, Santa Cruz County Sentinel, P.O. Box 638, Santa Cruz, Calif. 95061



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Eloise Graham, Christine Nagel, Velzoe Brown and Ron Clegg oppose the proposed interchange realignment.

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Fishhook

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Plans to overhaul of the Fishhook started in 1985, when the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission asked Caltrans to study the interchange. The purpose of the project is to improve safety at the junction, which has an accident rate five times that of the state average.

Once the Fishhook is demolished, in its place will be a 40-foot-tall overpass that merges southbound 17 to southbound 1. Fourteen retaining walls — each 5 to 30 feet tall — also will be built. Another seven sound walls — of 5 to 30 feet tall — are to be erected alongside Highway 1 near adjacent neighborhoods. Caltrans plans to replace existing plants and trees with \$1.7 million worth of landscaping and other cosmetics. More than 28 acres of landscaping will be replaced.

Esther Fuerte, 46, said she welcomed the proposed sound wall near her Rooney Street home. She has lived for four years in the four-bedroom house near the northbound Highway 1 on- and off-ramps at Morrissey Boulevard. Even with double-paned windows, traffic noise has grown louder, she said.

"Maybe it's good," Fuerte said, as she stood outside her house Sunday, cars whizzing by across the way. "It's getting harder to sleep."

But not everyone is optimistic.

Clegg said he and other opponents of the project are not against the idea of improving the interchange. It's the size, cost, and the fact that it does not reduce traffic congestion that flaws the \$66 million project, he explained.

New look for Fishhook

Once completed in 2003, the new Fishhook will be demolished. In its place will be the following changes:

■ Southbound 17 to northbound Highway 1: Motorists will merge with northbound Highway 1 traffic coming from the left.

■ Southbound 17 to southbound Highway 1: Motorists will take a direct two-lane overpass that merges into the right lane of Highway 1. The overpass will be 40 feet tall, about the height of a four-story building.

■ Northbound Highway 1 drivers will be able to stay in their lanes as they move past 17 and continue up the North Coast.

■ Southbound Highway 1 to northbound Highway 17: Motorists will exit on the right, instead of the current left lane exit, that connects with northbound 17 drivers coming from Ocean Street.

■ Northbound Highway 1 to downtown Santa Cruz: Drivers will take an off-ramp that directly merges with traffic from southbound 17 going toward Ocean Street.

■ Seven sound walls will be built at: Fairmount, Fernside, Plymouth, Felker, Rooney, Lee/North Plymouth, Ocean streets.

Besides, it's all wrong for Santa Cruz County, said Graham, who has lived in Santa Cruz for 20 years. "I think we need to look long-term about what we want for our community," she said. "I don't want us to be in a walled city with huge freeways going through it."

The transportation commission held a meeting last week to update residents on the project. There, Caltrans officials briefed the audience on the nearly finalized plans. Simulated photos gave residents a glimpse of what the project would look like.

It was at that forum that many in the audience apparently learned about how close to home the project would come. Caltrans and the commission pledged to work with the public before implementing the plan.

Velzoe Brown has lived in Santa

Cruz for 40 years. On Sunday, the jazz pianist said she too was concerned about how the new interchange would hurt the quality of life here.

She pointed to the greenery growing on the spot where a sound wall is to be placed. "No wall is going to purify the air like these trees do," she said.

But, perhaps more importantly, she added, the project will affect more than just her neighborhood.

Neighbor Christine Nagel agreed. "It will wipe out the ambience of Santa Cruz," said the landscape designer.

Graham nodded in agreement.

"Most of us have moved here from some place else because of the Santa Cruz environment," she said. "This huge freeway would change it. This is L.A. style."