



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel file

Southbound Highway 1 traffic grinds to a standstill on the Fishhook during an afternoon commute.

Environmental studies holding up highway work

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SANTA CRUZ — County residents are known for their environmental leanings, but that awareness may be what's keeping them sitting in traffic while the project that could alleviate their woes is delayed.

Meanwhile, highway projects in states like Arizona and Utah cruise along at a faster pace thanks to innovative methods that shave years off the design and construction process.

A plan to widen Highway 1 for 6.5 miles between Aptos and Santa Cruz can't begin until an environmental impact report is completed. And that could take eight years, Caltrans officials say.

They point, in part, to a heightened local concern for environmental issues

as one reason for the area's sometimes more lengthy studies. A project of similar scope elsewhere would likely average a little over five years, according to Gregg Albright, head of the area Caltrans district.

"I'm going to be bold and say we're not typical ... of the state of California," Albright said at this month's Regional Transportation Commission meeting. "I think people here have a higher level of concern for environmental issues."

And, "the longer it takes to complete a project, the higher the cost," Albright said.

"The two factors are the increased personnel hours spent and the fact that every year we don't build something, there is inflationary cost," he added.

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Traffic

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Caltrans hopes to streamline the process by working with community and resource agencies in parallel with the environmental process, Albright said. Still, input from all project stakeholders, including the Coastal Commission, the Federal Highway Administration, and the Environmental Protection Agency, must be taken into consideration.

Steve Noren, who lives in Moss Landing and drives to work in Capitola, says he may go to drastic measures if the widening project, estimated to cost \$200 million to \$250 million, is that far off.

"I'm not going to live here, because in eight years it will be impossible," Noren said. "I don't know why it's necessary to have studies when we're driving on roads that were created 30 years ago ... and need upgrading."

As for alternative transportation methods, Noren isn't convinced.

"You can't take your kid to soccer practice on a bicycle or bike to work and look like much of anything once you get there," Noren said. "And I don't think people will use a rail line because when you get to where you have to go, you will still have to get to where you have to go."

Tim Fitzmaurice, a Santa Cruz City Council member and chair of the county's Regional Transportation Commission, says a project that could take 10 years or more is "not acceptable."

"The best way we could serve commuters in the short term would be metering lights on the exits," Fitzmaurice said.

Other commuters ponder whether a project that takes more than a decade to finish will accommodate the traffic flow of the future once it is complete.

Claudia Espino, a Caltrans District 6 senior design engineer, says yes.

"Projects are planned to be feasible for 20 years after the construction date," she said. "That's what we call the design or project life."

And during the project design phase, ongoing studies ensure that the road will meet future needs, Espino said.

Environment an issue

Although environmental studies are notoriously time-consuming, those for



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Southbound Highway 1 traffic crawls toward the Capitola Avenue overpass.

the Santa Cruz area may take longer than elsewhere in the state, officials say.

Highlighting that is the fact that the commission recently funded a \$25,000 environmental review on its acquisition of the Santa Cruz Branch Rail, although such a study was not required.

"The proposed rail-line acquisition is essentially a paper project, meaning it's a transfer of ownership without any change to the physical environment," said Sharese Thompson, assistant planner with Denise Duffy and Associates, the firm contracted to do the study.

"The project actually meets California Environmental Quality Act requirements for exemption from an environmental review," Thompson said. "But ... this community has a very high sense of environmental awareness."

At the commission meeting Jan. 10, Caltrans officials explained why projects can take so long. The detailed process of achieving one step in a project before moving on to another could take 10 years or more before construction can begin, in some cases.

Quicker, cheaper

California may have a lot to learn from states using different approaches to cut the amount of time highway projects take.

Transportation officials in Arizona and Utah speak in terms of months, not years, when it comes to completing projects, due to a method called "design build," or fast track.

Using design build to widen Interstate 17 in Phoenix from six to eight lanes shaved years off the design and completion time, according to Ron Williams, an assistant engineer for the Arizona Department of Transportation. "We thought it would take three years for construction (alone), but it only took two years to design and construct it," Williams said.

Design build is a concurrent process in which the contractor, engineer and road owner work as a team. Project design and construction are done in tandem by a successful bidder, rather than in several phases by different companies.

"The speed of construction greatly reduces the inconvenience to the traveling public," Williams said, adding that design build is 5 to 6 percent cheap-

er and has lower overhead costs.

As for hastening the environmental process, Williams said that is more difficult.

"We often spend many years getting environmental clearance before we can start construction," Williams said. "The Federal Highway Administration is trying to speed that up, but it's controlled by the National Environmental Protection Agency process — and it's slowing us down."

Arizona officials have found having Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service officials — or other parties that might have environmental concerns with a project — present during some projects has helped to speed things along, since some environmental decisions can be made on site.

A 5 percent savings on the \$200 million to \$250 million Highway 1 project would be about \$12.5 million.

Special legislation allowed toll booths in Orange County to be constructed with the design build method. Still, Caltrans does not yet have legislative approval to pursue the method.

Besides, it's a risky way to do business, according to Mike Galizio, Caltrans spokesman. When construction

moves ahead before designs have been completed, any change of plans could cause delays and possible cost increases, he said.

Pilot project

California does have one ace up its sleeve for possibly speeding future projects along. A pilot project called design sequencing was approved by the assembly in 1999.

Different from design build, design sequencing allows each phase of a project to move ahead incrementally after it is designed.

With design sequencing, projects can be awarded when designs are only 30 percent complete, rather than the 100 percent required by conventional methods.

Of the 12 pilot projects allowed by assembly bills 405 and 2607, eight have been tentatively selected, though none are in the Central Coast region, Galizio said.

To qualify for the pilot, a project must be nominated by its Caltrans district after having received full funding and having completed environmental clearance. It should also be a relatively non-controversial, non-complex project, Galizio said.

The pilot project will end Jan. 1, 2005. Then Caltrans will prepare an evaluation of the program's outcome for the legislature.

Commuters' fear

Though recently retired, Paul Elerick commuted to work from his home in Aptos for 31 years.

Elerick thinks the years-an environmental study could take will be time well spent, but says widening Highway 1 only to Aptos Drive will simply "move the bottleneck south by a couple of miles."

"I have asked the Regional Transportation Commission to widen it all the way to Freedom Boulevard," Elerick said. "Sure it will be more expensive, but if you're not going to do it right, why do it at all?"

Elerick foresees another problem. "Next year, Macy's is opening at the Capitola Mall," he said. "I don't think there are enough lanes on Highway 1 to accommodate the traffic that will attract."

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