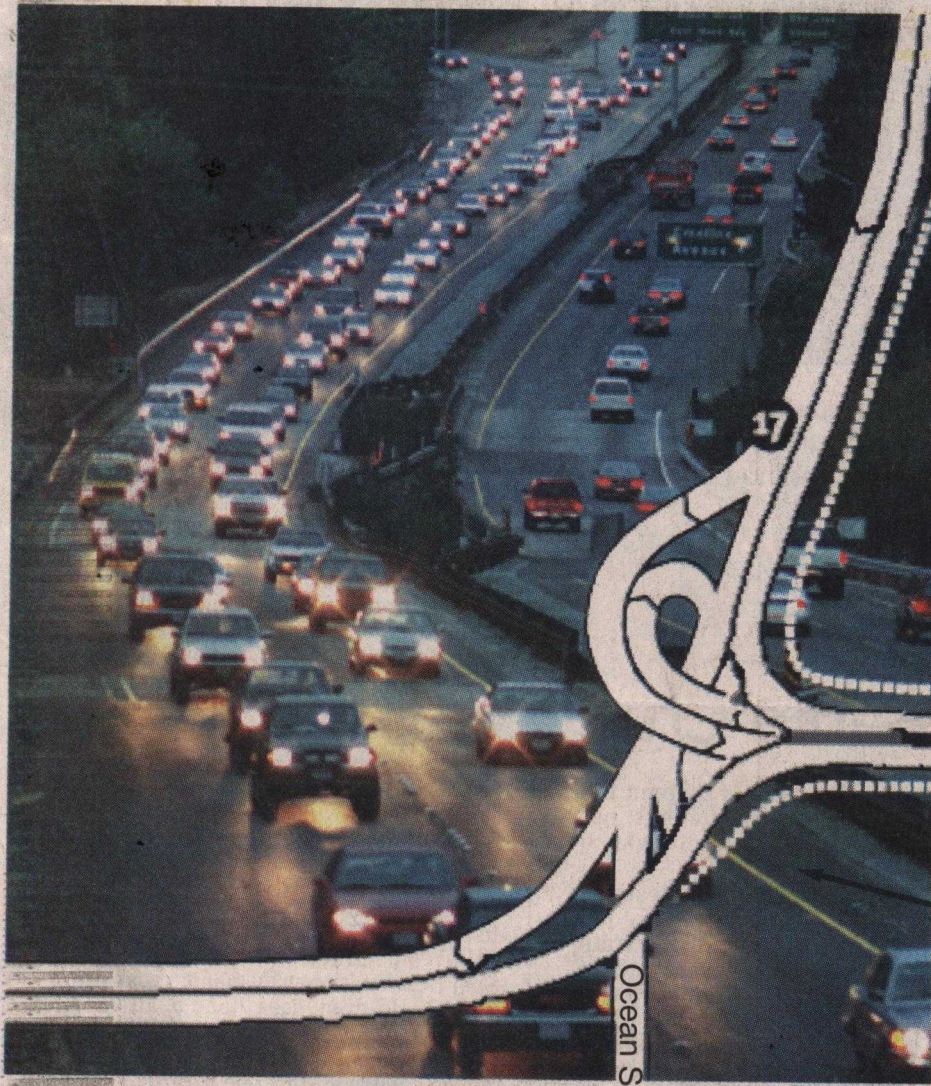


Merge lanes OK'd



Panel gives nod to improvements at Highways 1-17

NEW MERGE LANES

(Morrissey to Pasatiempo)

NEW MERGE LANES

(extend to Morrissey)

Sentinel graphic; photo by Shmuel Thaler

Santa Cruz officials outvoted on regional panel

By **DARREL W. COLE**
Sentinel staff writer

Highways 5

SANTA CRUZ — The Santa Cruz County Transportation Commission voted Thursday to add merge lanes to Highway 1 at the Fishhook interchange despite heated objections from the Santa Cruz contingent.

After three hours of public testimony — largely in favor of the additional lanes — the commission on a 6-4 vote directed the state Department of Transportation to begin planning for merge lanes on Highway 1 between the Fishhook and Morrissey Boulevard.

Caltrans officials have the money for the project but say construction will not begin for at least two years.

While the new lanes are intended to improve safety at the complex interchange, the four com-

missioners voting against the project called them a veiled attempt to widen the highway.

Proposals to widen Highway 1 from Santa Cruz south have met with strong resistance from environmentalists and others who contend it would encourage automobile use while ultimately doing little to ease congestion. They also argue it would encourage growth.

The \$31 million project authorized Thursday includes one inside, southbound merge lane from the interchange to just past Morrissey Boulevard, a stretch of about 1.5 miles.

On the northbound side of the highway, a merge lane would be added from Morrissey to Pasatiempo Avenue.

"It's gone on for 15 years looking at this project and from what I'm hearing from the audience, they want to do something about this intersection," said Commissioner Jan Beautz, a Santa

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Cruz County supervisor. "People are tired of inaction and I don't want any more reports back. I think we need to go forward."

The next step in the process is for Caltrans to perform another environmental review because the approved project differs from the original proposal of four merge lanes.

Among those speaking in favor of the new lanes were representatives of the Seaside Co., Texas Instruments and some area unions. Most said the change would help relieve congestion while improving safety.

"The Fishhook problem should have been solved years ago," said Marshall Delk of Soquel. "You don't have an option now. Something has to be done. Take action now."

Caltrans says the lanes are needed because ac-

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Merge lanes

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cident rates around the Fishhook, which is the Highway 1/17 interchange, are two to three times higher than the state average.

Caltrans officials also want a larger overhaul of the entire interchange, a project that has been on the books for years.

The 6-4 vote ran along geographical lines. Voting in favor were county Supervisors Walt Symons, Jeff Almquist and Beautz, Scotts Valley City Councilman Bart Cavallaro, former Capitola Councilman Ron Graves and Watsonville Mayor Oscar Rios.

Dissenting were Mike Rotkin, Katherine Beiers and Tim Fitzmaurice, all Santa Cruz City Council members, and Supervisor Mardi Wormhoudt, a former Santa Cruz mayor.

"This project shouldn't be called the Fishhook anymore because it is the widening of Highway 1," Beiers said. "That's the simple way to put it."

Wormhoudt said the commission should not decide on the project for several months until it finishes studying congestion issues in general as part of the Major Transportation Investment Study.

"You can call it safety improvements or auxiliary lanes but to me it's still a widening," Wormhoudt said. "We need to pay attention to that study. This is an incremental widening of that highway."

Rotkin said the project would not make the interchange safer.

"We shouldn't be spending this money to make a symbolic statement that really won't address a safety or congestion issue," he said. "It just doesn't make sense."

Beautz responded, "It's his opinion that this is a symbolic statement. That's not my opinion. I think this will make real improvements."

Almquist agreed, saying "This is a bottleneck problem and I don't buy the argument from Santa Cruz that this will widen Highway 1."

Graves, who was attending his last meeting after 26 years on the commission, said he remembers when Highway 1 was one lane.

"I think this improves congestion," he said. "I don't view it as a widening because that is an issue we will be deciding for the next millennium."

In addition to merge lanes, the project will include new bridges at Emeline Avenue, Carbonera Creek, Branciforte Creek and Branciforte Avenue and Market Street, and will reduce the speed limit from 65 mph to 55 between the Branciforte overcrossing and northbound Highway 17 connection.