

Money for Highway 1 shot down

State denies cash for widening study

By KAREN A. DAVIS
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ — Santa Cruz County held out its proverbial hand only to have its knuckles symbolically rapped by state officials in San Diego on Thursday.

The county Regional Transportation Commission had asked for \$3.8 million in state money to begin the next phase of the Highway 1 widening project now — environmental review and preliminary design work. But that request was denied by apprehensive state Transportation Commission officials.

As a result, a number of local projects could face funding shifts as the commission shuffles to find money to move ahead with the review. The commission has listed widening the 6.5-mile stretch between Aptos and Santa Cruz as its No. 1 priority. And county supervisors and Commissioners Jan Beutz and Ellen Pirie say they aren't content to wait until the next round of state funding allocations in 2004 to begin an environmental study. Plans to add a carpool lane in each direction between State Park Drive and Morrissey Boulevard can't begin until such a report is complete.

"The money we were asking for is our money — it's just not allocated yet," said Beutz. That means money for other local projects may need to be shifted "from year to year" to allow the environmental review to move

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ELLEN PIRIE,
COUNTY
SUPERVISOR,
ON HOW THE
STUDY WILL BE
FUNDED

Highway 1

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ahead now, she said.

That may force commissioners to make some tough choices.

"No matter what we move (money) from, somebody is going to be unhappy about it," said Pirie. "It is not like there are unnecessary programs out there we can take it from. We want to support all of them."

While a number of local officials and business representatives in attendance spoke in favor of the widening, Santa Cruz Mayor Christopher Krohn urged state officials to deny the funding request. With highway completion slated for fall 2013, Krohn, a local commission alternate, has said money should be put toward more immediate alternatives, including metering highway on-ramps or a parking cashout system that would pay people not to drive.

"It's not at all clear whether Santa Cruz voters will pass the half-cent sales tax being discussed by the (local commission)," Krohn said in a letter to state officials written on official City of Santa Cruz stationery. "There is nowhere near a consensus among San-

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ta Cruz voters on this issue."

State officials had questioned what long-term funding would be available for future phases of the estimated \$300 million project. They expressed concerns about approving state money for a project without some assurance it is financially feasible. Though Krohn's statements may or may not have affected the outcome, Pirie was less than pleased.

"I think Mr. Krohn did a real disservice to Santa Cruz County," she said Thursday afternoon. "(What he said) may have added to the feeling that Santa Cruz really hasn't made up its mind (about the widening)."

Santa Cruz City Councilman Mark Primack was bothered that Krohn wrote the letter on official city letter-

head. This may have made it appear Krohn was representing the city's will, Primack said, when Krohn "was speaking only for himself as an individual." The council has taken no position on the funding request Krohn urged the state to deny. Krohn could not be reached for comment Thursday afternoon.

Commission Executive Director Linda Wilshusen, though not surprised by the state's decision, remained optimistic.

"I think it is a minor setback," she said. "We'll have to figure out where the money is going to come from."

Jim Conklin, director of the Santa Cruz County Business Council, also remained positive.

"We are going to have to be more

self-reliant in Santa Cruz County," he said. "The important thing is there seems to be a coming together of people from all over the county (on this). And, frankly, you need that kind of support to get a yes vote on a half-cent sales tax."

To gain the favor of apprehensive state officials, the commission voted early last month to pursue a sales tax measure by November 2004 to fund the widening. Still, Wilshusen said the fact that the commission decided against putting such a measure on the ballot this year may have affected the state's decision. A half-cent sales tax for 10 to 20 years would generate an estimated \$177 million to \$415 million, preliminary projections show.

Though about \$160 million in projects statewide were competing for state funding approval on Thursday, only about \$124 million in funds was available, thanks in part to the state's recent budget crisis, according to Kim Shultz, transportation planner.

"The priority went to projects that were shelf ready or that had longer term financing in place," he said.

Contact Karen A. Davis at kdavis@santa-cruz.com.