

Toll lanes seen as top priority for Highway 1

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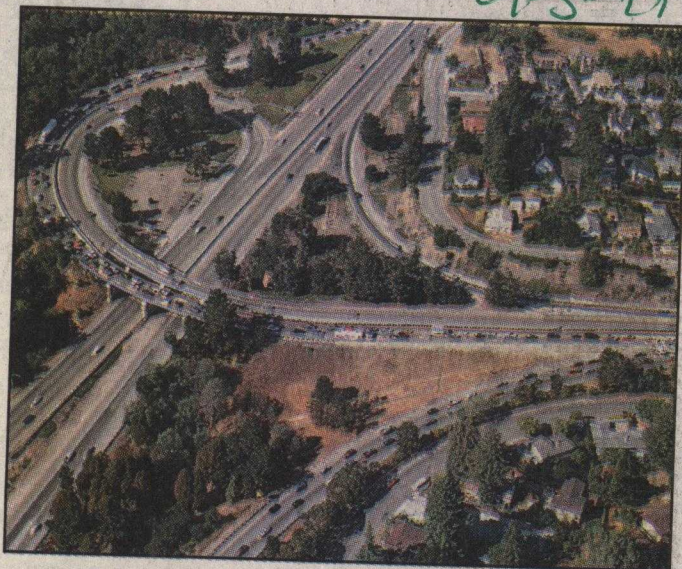
SANTA CRUZ — The county's transportation commission reaffirmed Highway 1 toll lanes as its top transportation priority Thursday with the recognition there isn't enough money yet to do the job right.

Also Thursday, the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission was told by Caltrans that a public hearing is scheduled in October for another controversial project, installation of new merge lanes at the Highway 1/Highway 17 interchange.

Though the majority of commissioners feel both projects would improve traffic flow along the Highway 1 corridor between Watsonville and Santa Cruz, Commissioner Mardi Wormhoudt warned that opposition from environmentalists will be strong.

Wormhoudt, a county supervisor, opposes both ideas, as does Commissioner Tim Fitzmaurice, a Santa Cruz city councilman.

Fitzmaurice said he questions the wis-



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

The Fishhook looking north; Santa Cruz traffic at bottom merges with Highway 17 traffic entering southbound Highway 1. An October public hearing will examine merge lanes for the interchange.

dom of pursuing toll lanes when the construction money isn't yet available and it isn't clear whether the idea will work.

"It seems interesting to me this is already

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beginning to devolve," Fitzmaurice said.

Despite the environmental and financial issues, Thursday's meeting confirmed the commission's intent to move ahead with toll lanes — additional travel lanes open to vehicles with at least two occupants and to lone motorists willing to pay a fee.

The commission staff was recommending that the state Department of Transportation study the toll-lane proposal but plan on recommending less expensive options, such as metering lights, if the toll lanes proved to be unfeasible.

The commissioners, however, agreed to delete that language from a letter being sent to Caltrans.

Commission Chairman Bart Cavallaro said it should be made clear that toll lanes are the top priority even though the \$46 million now available would finance only two to three miles of toll road, about half the length proponents consider ideal.

Cavallaro, a Scotts Valley city councilman, told the commission staff, "We know we need more money and

the direction is we need for you to find that money."

Commissioner Jan Beutz, a county supervisor, said ramp metering was previously voted off the commission's list of projects and should not be added now. She said toll lanes must be studied first.

Commissioners voted 6-4 in August to approve projects costing \$260 million to improve traffic flow along Highway 1. The approved projects included toll lanes, \$124 million for improved bus service, \$50 million for local road improvements, \$15 million to acquire a rail-way right of way, \$24 million for bike and pedestrian paths, and \$1 million for electric bikes.

Missing, despite the right-of-way acquisition, was any proposal for new rail service, a favorite option of some who oppose any expansion of Highway 1.

A leading argument against toll lanes or other highway widening is that it would encourage growth.

The August vote represented a historic shift in the commission's position. Before a rotation in the commission's membership, the body was dominated by Santa Cruz representatives, who generally opposed widening.

In the next six months, the commission will ask Cal-

trans to prepare a comprehensive report on toll lanes, which is expected to take at least 18 months.

Also in the next six months, the commission staff will work out a way to purchase the rail line.

In the next year, the commission will develop more definitive money sources and cost estimates, figure out how to distribute the electric bikes and determine the priorities for local road rehabilitation, new bike projects and new bus service.

The commission approved the interchange project last December. It would involve new lanes leading to and from the infamous Fishhook interchange, the junction of highways 1 and 17 in Santa Cruz.

Greg Albright of Caltrans said that before a final design is presented, he will set up public meetings with the neighborhoods near the interchange. Community-wide public hearings also will be scheduled. An exact date has not been set for the October public hearing.

Albright said he wants to build a consensus, but commissioners said that's unlikely because an environmental review will likely identify noise issues and other concerns.