

Carpool lanes favored for Highway 1 widening

Highways
By David L. Beck
Mercury News

If and when Highway 1 is widened, it probably won't be with conventional traffic lanes. The Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission is recommending carpool lanes with standard medians as the preferred alternative in the long-debated project to loosen the morning and evening backups through Santa Cruz.

The staff recommendation calls on Caltrans to eliminate from consideration "mixed flow lanes" as well as reversible lanes. Another possibility, toll lanes, is still being studied. The commission is asking

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Caltrans whether it wants to keep toll lanes in the mix, and if it does, to pick one version to study.

The project would widen a section of road that has been unchanged since it was constructed in the 1950s. It has been named the commission's top priority despite public opposition from such local officials as Christopher Krohn, the bike-riding mayor of Santa Cruz.

One part of the long-term Highway 1 project, widening Mission Street through the West Side of Santa Cruz, is already complete.

A second part has been approved and funded, to the tune of \$52 million. That

will widen Highway 1 from the "fishhook" at the end of Highway 17, where traffic from 17, the West Side and downtown Santa Cruz all tries to push onto Highway 1 east to the first exit, Morrissey Boulevard.

That merge lane project, as Caltrans calls it, is in the final design phase and could begin construction in 2004, according to the transportation commission's executive director, Linda Wilshusen.

"Technically," she said, "it's a safety project," which makes it less politically controversial. But Highway 1 is "still going

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FISHHOOK PLANS

At 9 a.m. today in the Santa Cruz City Council chambers, Caltrans will present a pair of reports for widening Highway 1 at the "fishhook" interchange at the end of Highway 17, where traffic from 17, the West Side and downtown Santa Cruz merge onto Highway 1. The reports will include options for:

■ Ramp metering and auxiliary lanes.

■ Carpool lanes with narrow (1.8 meters) and standard (6.6 meters) median strips. The highway now has the latter, with room for a car to pull off the road.

Source: Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission

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to be constrained, capacity-wise, once you hit Morrissey."

Caltrans will present a pair of reports on the project today, at a 9 a.m. session in the Santa Cruz City Council chambers. One report will focus on ramp metering and auxiliary lanes. Wilshusen said she doubts that version will fly. "Studies show that you practically need auxiliary lanes between each interchange," she said. "And if you're going to do that, you might as well widen the highway."

The second report includes ramp metering and auxiliary lanes along with several alternatives, such as carpool lanes

with narrow (1.8 meters) and standard (6.6 meters) median strips. The former would make Highway 1 like Highway 17; the latter matches what the highway has now, with room for a car to pull over.

The report will include what Caltrans calls a base line or do-nothing scenario, under which by the year 2020 (assuming that driving habits don't change, "which in fact they do," Wilshusen said) the merge lanes get longer and so does the congested time of day.

The commission's staff recommendation is to add carpool lanes with a standard median.

There is a financial benefit to narrowing down the alternatives as soon as possible, be-

cause fewer environmental studies would be required. How much an environmental impact review costs depends "partly on who does it," Wilshusen said, and "partly on the level of public interest and public involvement."

The commission has squirreled away \$3.8 million for environmental impact reviews, and will hold a public hearing Aug. 1 to allocate the money.

When could construction begin? "I can't really say," Wilshusen said. "Everybody's looking to expedite" the 15-year Caltrans schedule, she said. But "I really can't imagine that you would start working out there within the next five years."

One other long-term possi-

bility remains. The commission is in intermittent negotiations with Union Pacific for the stretch of standard-gauge railroad track between Davenport and Watsonville. The commission has \$10 million but needs more. "We're trying to find other money," Wilshusen said.

Owning the track and right of way, which parallel Highway 1, would permit the county to experiment with light-rail vehicles used in Germany that run on standard tracks and are diesel-powered. It also presents opportunities for a Santa Cruz-Watsonville bicycle path.

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