

✓ ^{HIGHWAYS} Widen Highway 17, CHP captain urges

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RIO DEL MAR — Those who do not favor widening Highway 17 have "their heads stuck in the sand," Capt. Steve Ellis of the local California Highway Patrol told Rio del Mar Improvement Association directors Monday afternoon.

Ellis told directors that Highway 17 "ultimately has to be widened and straightened to six lanes." He added, however, that such an occurrence is at least 10 years away and probably more than that.

"The longer we wait, the harder it gets," Ellis said. "The traffic is already here."

The captain, who took over for retiring Capt. Don Anderson in January, also advocated the construction of shoulders to get disabled vehicles off the roadway, installation of emergency call boxes, the use of radar guns for speed enforcement and Highway Patrol motorcycles as interim measures on Highway 17.

The county just this month has applied for a grant from the state Office of Traffic

Safety to buy three radar guns, two of which will be used by the Highway Patrol to enforce the 50-mph limit on Highway 17. The county Transportation Commission also went on record last January as supporting widening of Highway 17 near the summit for limited passing lanes.

Ellis listed as a top priority his office getting motorcycles for enforcement. He said it was "embarrassing" to have to ask the Scotts Valley Police Department, which has one motorcycle, to assist them when Highway 17 is clogged by an accident "and the mighty Highway Patrol is stuck because we can't get through."

He also said it was "ridiculous" not to have motorcycles to control beach traffic on weekends in congested residential areas, such as Rio del Mar.

On advocating the widening and straightening of Highway 17, Ellis said his officers would just as soon see motorists moving in bumper-to-bumper traffic at 5-mph "because it's safer." He added,

"But, it's not very efficient use of the roadway."

Ellis conceded Highway 17 was "more of a user-problem" than anything else.

"People who drive it have it confused with Laguna Seca or Le Mans. At 50-mph, it's actually a very pleasant drive. It only gets hair-raising when you're going 65 and come around a curve up to a sand truck going 3 mph."

The difference between driving the curvy, nine-mile portion of Highway 17 at 50-mph versus 70-mph is only three minutes, according to Ellis. Highway Patrol tests show it took 10.79 minutes at 50-mph compared to 7.89 minutes at 70-mph.

The average daily flow of traffic on Highway 17 has increased 30 to 40 percent in the last 10 years, while the fatal and injury accident rate has increased more than 40 percent, according to the Highway Patrol. The highway was designed for about 40,000 vehicles in a 24-hour period. There are times during the summer when traffic is near 70,000 vehicles an hour.