

HIGHWAYS

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Summer Hwy. 17 face lift planned

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Road crews will give Highway 17 a massive face lift this summer, repaving all four lanes between Scotts Valley and Los Gatos in a six-month project described as the largest of its kind in 20 years — and certain to cause frequent traffic delays.

"This is a major overhaul," said George Butler, a road maintenance supervisor in the California Department of Transportation's Santa Cruz office.

Early preparatory work on the \$1.8 million project will begin today near The Cats restaurant with spot closings on single lanes. The bulk of the repaving effort, however, will run from mid-July until January 1992,

with large sections of lanes closed in each direction.

"People should count on adding about half an hour" to their travel time between San Jose and Santa Cruz, said Linda Wilshusen, executive director of the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission.

"It may be only 15 minutes," Wilshusen added. "It just depends on how backed up it gets."

The resurfacing will run from Santa's Village in Scotts Valley to the Highway 9-Monte Sereno exit in Los Gatos, a distance of about 12 miles.

Caltrans officials say they are making every effort to ease the traffic delays. Work will take place during non-commute hours,

from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays and until noon on Fridays.

In addition, crews will not work on the road during weekends, when thousands of vacationers and Silicon Valley residents heading for Santa Cruz beaches traditionally pack the winding freeway's mountain curves.

But because the type of asphalt used must be poured during warm temperatures in order to stick properly, crews will not be able to work nights.

"I know it's going to be a problem for those people who have to drive over the hill — but it can't be helped," said Ed Enos, Caltrans superintendent for San Jose.

About 60,000 cars a day are driven over

Highway 17, 25,000 of them by commuters.

Enos said the project is part of Caltrans' regular preventive maintenance program. The type of asphalt on Highway 17, known as open grade mix, is a porous mixture designed to prevent ice buildup by letting water filter through. Open grade mix must be replaced every five to seven years, Enos said.

Starting today, and running until June, 20-person crews will grind down rough spots in the road, many of which were patched after the Loma Prieta earthquake.

Working during non-commute hours, they will close small portions of the highway in

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both directions, Enos said.

When the large-scale resurfacing stage of the plan begins shortly after the July 4 weekend, crews will close one lane in each direction for about a mile.

Wilshusen said she asked Caltrans officials to postpone the project, but they told her it was already overdue. The road should have been resurfaced during repairs after the quake, she said, but Caltrans officials were struggling desperately to reopen it after a monthlong closing to clear debris and didn't want to delay any further.

Wilshusen said the county has asked Caltrans for \$25,000 to launch a publicity campaign to update motorists on the project, announce closings and tout alternative transportation such as ride-sharing and the Highway 17 bus shuttle.

Butler, of the Santa Cruz Caltrans office, said he has worked with Caltrans for 21 years and has not seen a resurfacing project of this size on Highway 17. The only comparable project, other than the heroic earthquake repairs, he said, occurred when crews built a center divider on the freeway a decade ago.