

Highway 17 opens over the weekend

Without fanfare and a month ahead of the original schedule, Highway 17 opened yesterday morning to all traffic.

Recently, Caltrans officials had projected Thanksgiving week for the reopening of the winding highway linking Santa Cruz County and the Santa Clara Valley. Transportation officials credited round-the-clock crew efforts and restricted use of the highway for allowing Caltrans workers to repair the quake-damaged roadway sooner than first thought.

The highway opened to northbound traffic at 7:18 a.m. yesterday and to southbound motorists at 7:30 a.m.

"We worked out there 24 hours a day," said Mike Ellis, a senior transportation planner with Caltrans. The California Highway Patrol-led convoys of commuters and mountain residents were also a big factor in helping crews get the job done, he said.

"That really helped us get through faster," Ellis said.

During pre-earthquake times, between 40,000 and 50,000 vehicles used the highway daily, Caltrans officials said.

Applause greeted Ellis's announcement of the highway opening, which came at the end of the weekly Saturday meeting

where local, county, state and federal representatives provide updates on earthquake-recovery efforts. Those gatherings are held at the County Governmental Center in Santa Cruz.

Originally, Ellis said after the meeting, officials expected the Santa Cruz side of Highway 17 to be closed until Christmas. The cost of the repair, which included removing three landslides, resurfacing cracks, some of which measured 5 inches in width, and replacing guard rails, was about \$5 million. The majority of the repairs were done in the 6-mile stretch of the highway beginning at Granite Creek Road in the south.

In other transportation news, Ellis projected an April 1 opening date for Highway 1 at the Struve Slough bridge in Watsonville. The contractor hired to repair the roadway and span, which collapsed into the slough during the quake, is set to start work at the end of the month, Ellis said. Once the project is begun, crews will work two shifts for the next 90 days.

The repaving of Lee Road and the addition of culverts to the damaged stretch are among the improvements planned, Ellis said.

— Laramie Trevino