

Soquel Drive to be widened at Rancho del Mar

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It's taken more than a decade for Santa Cruz County to gather the money to do it, but widening Soquel Drive in front of the Rancho del Mar shopping center should begin this summer.

County Supervisor Robley Levy said yesterday that the county will call for bids in June and work will actually begin in August, ending before the Christmas shopping season.

County Public Works design engineer Rachel Fatoohi said yesterday that the project will cost approximately \$1 million.

About \$400,000 of the money came from Safeway Stores when it expanded its store in the Rancho del Mar shopping center. The rest has been collected over the years from smaller projects along Soquel

Drive.

Levy said the project is now fully funded and should not be affected by the current fiscal crises facing the county and the state.

Fatoohi said plans call for Soquel Drive to be widened to five lanes — four traffic lanes and a left-turn lane between State Park Drive and Aptos Rancho Road.

A four-way traffic signal will be installed at that intersection, which will become the main entrance and exit to the shopping center. The present shopping center entrance off Soquel Drive next to the Shell service station will be closed. The separate entrance to the service station as well as the entrance from State Park will remain open, Fatoohi said.

Soquel Drive will narrow to two travel lanes and a left-turn lane

between Aptos Rancho Road and Spreckels Drive.

Levy said the county would like to install a traffic signal at Spreckels and Soquel drives, too, but she's not sure if the money will be available this time.

At the minimum, however, the underground conduits for the signals will be buried at the intersection.

If the traffic signals are installed this fall at the Spreckels Drive intersection, no left turns will be allowed from Soquel Drive onto Spreckels during the evening rush hours, Levy said. There isn't room on the narrow, two-lane bridge over Aptos Creek.

Levy doesn't see any changes in the foreseeable future for Soquel Drive as it curves through Aptos Village. The obstacles there — fi-

nancially insurmountable now — are the two Southern Pacific railroad underpasses and the 1930s-era automobile bridge over Aptos Creek.

It would cost millions to replace the Soquel Drive bridge and millions more to rebuild the railroad bridge abutments so Soquel Drive could be widened to four lanes, Levy said.

Among the improvements that will be made, Fatoohi said, will be two left-turn lanes on State Park Drive at the Soquel Drive intersection; sidewalks on the Rancho del Mar side of Soquel Drive in front of the entire shopping center; and bike paths along the widened sections of Soquel Drive on both sides of Soquel Drive from Aptos Creek to State Park Drive, linking up with bike lanes that run toward Cabrillo College.