

Panel tries to soften impact of commuter limits

By JOHN ROBINSON
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SANTA CRUZ — A plan to reduce traffic congestion and automobile use was adopted Thursday by the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission, but it will have little effect on the average motorist until next year.

That's when local ordinances are to be enacted that will require employers to reduce the number of automobile trips by employees, or face fines.

To force employees to cut back on auto use, employers may start charging employees for parking, and must offer alternative transportation programs, according to a commission summary.

The so-called "trip-reduction ordinances," which have not yet been enacted, will cost employers \$40 to \$100 per employee, according to a study by the transportation commission.

"We've worked very closely with the business community to respond and make changes based on their concerns," said Linda Wilshusen, commission executive director. "Of course not everyone 100 percent agrees with this."

The so-called 'trip-reduction ordinances' will cost employers \$40 to \$100 per employee, according to one study.

The state-required "congestion-management program" has taken nearly two years for the commission to develop. Passage of Proposition 111 in June 1990 required such a program.

The goal of the program is to improve air quality and reduce traffic congestion by developing and encouraging people to use alternative transportation, including car pools, public buses and bicycles.

To put teeth in the proposition, it was required that all local jurisdictions — cities and the county — adopt trip-reduction ordinances, with the burden being placed on employers to ensure auto use is reduced.

Some of the ideas that employers could use to force employees to use alternative transportation are:

- Charge those to who drive alone at least \$25 a

month to park in company parking lots.

- Provide employees at least a \$25-a-month commute allowance and charge those who drive alone at least \$25 a month for parking.

- Pay \$21 a month to employees who use mass transit, car pool, bike or walk to work.

- Provide free taxi transportation for car-poolers who need a ride in case of an emergency such as a child-care problem.

A model trip-reduction ordinance was adopted by the transportation commission Thursday as part of the congestion management plan.

These ordinances will be given further public review before they are passed by the respective jurisdictions. Fines also would be determined at that time.

The business community has been watching the commission recommendations closely.

"The key is how it is going into place and whether it deals in a realistic way with the traffic situation," said John Lisher, a Santa Cruz businessman and former director of the Santa Cruz Chamber of Commerce. "We all know there is a problem."

Details of the ordinances will be worked out during upcoming hearings. One goal is to achieve a county-wide average vehicle ridership of 1.35 persons per vehicle.

The greatest burden will be placed on large employers, those with more than 50 employees, who could be required to have nearly 40 percent of their employees using alternative transportation, with lesser requirements on businesses with 10 to 49 employees.

"To a large company like the Santa Cruz Operation which has 1,200 employees, that adds up to a lot of money," Lisher said. "But when you look at it, there are a ton of retailers that employ a lot fewer people."

The economic impact study by the transportation commission concluded that the congestion plan will not cause serious economic problems for employers or employees.