

Costco opens

Traffic congeals

By BRIAN WACHTER
Sentinel correspondent

SANTA CRUZ — Cashier Amy Muscato served hundreds of opening-day Costco customers Thursday, but that wasn't the toughest part of her day.

"The worst part was getting to work," she said.

Thousands of cars trying to get to Costco formed a snag that began on northbound Highway 1 and continued onto River Street.

Drivers trying to travel north or south on Highway 1 found both directions jammed because of the Costco opening and road work between Morrissey Boulevard and the La Fonda Avenue overpass.

Those attempting a detour via Soquel Avenue encountered city road repairs from Morrissey Boulevard and Capitola Road extension.

The backup also upset River Street-area business and business people.

"It's a freaking mess," said Rick Santee, co-owner of Central Home Supply on River Street.

The traffic jam, which began when the store opened at 8 a.m., was still stagnant at 3 p.m., he said. Several Santa Cruz police officers directed traffic.

"When our customers want to leave, we have to ask one of the cops to stop traffic to let them out, or one of our employees has to do it. I've almost been run over twice," Santee said.

Before the Costco warehouse was built, city planner Ken Thomas said he didn't foresee a traffic problem because "most of the trips to Costco are taken in the noon hour" when traffic is "not at its worst" in the area.

Graniterock truck dispatcher Don Birt, who works at a cement plant on adjacent Coral Street, disagreed.

"People are going at all times," he said.



Matt DeGorio tries to keep a classic Costco load from shifting and pinning his mom, Laura.

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos

"The city will eventually have to address the problem."

As of Thursday, the city had no such plans.

"It's too soon to jump to conclusions" about Thursday's traffic jam, said Director of Public Works Larry Erwin.

He said the store's grand opening — two hours earlier than normal — is a special circumstance that can't be used to judge future conditions.

Some people went simply to be a part of the crowd.

"I drove up because I was bored," said Burt Sanders of Soquel. "I just wanted to see the traffic."

Meanwhile Santee, who had been a supporter of the store before it opened, points to the city as the source of the problem, and fears the worst for his business.

"I blame the mental midgets on the City

Council. They put a high-volume retail business in the middle of an industrial center. We have competitors that are much easier to get to. We've been a family-run business for 20 years — I don't know if we'll make it to 21."

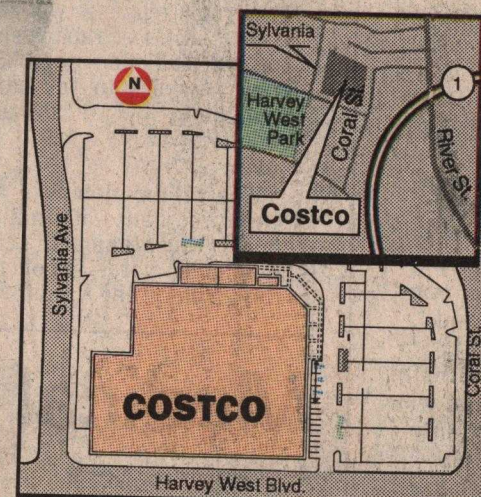
Tom Suchevis, a spokesman for Plantronics, an electronics company on Encinal Street, said vendors trying to reach his business were delayed 15 to 20 minutes.

"Changes need to be made" on River Street, he said.

Santa Cruz Fire Capt. Bill Starrs drove a fire truck to Costco in response to an employee's medical emergency and got police assistance in navigating the congestion.

"The traffic was backed up, but we got there OK," he said.

Costco, which paid for the off-duty officers directing traffic, will continue the service today, said Sgt. Chuck Varner.



Chris Carothers/Sentinel