

Another Fishhook review promised

By DARREL W. COLE
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — Proper environmental review will be conducted before any work begins on new merge lanes at the Fishhook, state officials assured county transportation commissioners Thursday.

Commissioner Mardi Wormhoudt, also a member of the county Board of Supervisors, had questioned the Department of Transportation's willingness to conduct a full environmental review. She said Caltrans engineers seemed to be "kissing off" a full review.

Caltrans had conducted an environmental review several years ago in a separate study. The latest project is a scaled-down version, and it's not clear if a full review would be necessary, Caltrans officials said.

Caltrans environmental project engineer Gayne Sears said 50 to 80 percent of the review is complete and it seemed only a "re-evaluation" might be needed.

Wormhoudt replied, "It makes a mockery of (state environmental laws) saying you already know" what the impact will be.

Sears denied the charge and said there will be more environmental hearings and reviews, as required by state and federal laws.

Wormhoudt continued, however, saying the "cavalier attitude doesn't give me confidence Caltrans is really looking at these issues. ... I think Caltrans is kind of kissing it off."

Sears didn't respond but Jay Walter, Caltrans district director, a non-voting member of the commission, did.

"I respectfully disagree we would ever kiss off the environmental process. ... We'll take all the comment before we go forward," Walter said, adding that the project must meet federal and state environmental requirements.

With that reassurance, Wormhoudt said she was satisfied the proper environmental review would be conducted.

The \$33 million project, approved by the commission last year, includes additional merge lanes from northbound Highway 1 to northbound Highway 17 and from southbound Highway 1, just past River Street, through the interchange and past Morrissey Boulevard.

State officials presented the commission with new design plans Thursday and a schedule for public hearings.

Caltrans scrapped plans to have two lanes merge into northbound Highway 17 from northbound Highway 1 and instead reduced it to one lane. Caltrans officials said the danger of two lanes merging into 17 and



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the lack of visibility was too great a safety concern.

Opponents of the project, including some commissioners, said their concerns have not been fully addressed. Wormhoudt and commissioners Katherine Beiers and Tim Fitzmaurice said they had other questions that need answers, including the number of trees that will have to be removed, the impact of construction on Carbonera and Branciforte creeks, whether some affected highway bridges are historic and the amount of property needed for the widening.

Caltrans couldn't give specifics to those questions but promised to have some answers when public hearings

are held.

Among the issues still to be ironed out is a proposal for sound walls as high as 15 feet at points between Morrissey and the Fishhook.

Construction is scheduled to begin in 2003 and to be completed in 2006. Caltrans said the project is intended to make the highway safer — the accident rate is three times the state average — not to reduce congestion.

The project was approved in December, but commissioners Wormhoudt, Beiers and Fitzmaurice opposed it, saying it was not a merge-lane project but a highway widening.

That may or may not have been true, but in August

the commission approved a project to widen the highway by building toll lanes. Caltrans senior transportation engineer Michael Lim said the merge lane project will be designed to accommodate future highway widening.

With the preliminary project design completed, Caltrans officials have scheduled four meetings with area residents:

- 4-7 p.m. Nov. 17 at the Elks Lodge, 150 Jewell St.
- 7-9 p.m. Dec. 7, Neighborhood Church, 225 Rooney St.
- 7-9 p.m. Dec. 8, Emeline Complex, Building K, room 206 and 207, 1400 Emeline St.
- 7-9 p.m. Dec. 9, Emeline Complex, Building D, auditorium, 1080 Emeline Ave.