

# Traffic problems convince council to hold hearing

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SANTA CRUZ — Easter week reminded everyone how bad the traffic congestion can be here during peak tourist times.

With summer only 10 weeks away, and with congestion worse than ever, traffic worries will continue to ride high on the minds of residents, drivers, bicyclists, pedestrians, tourists and public officials in the coming season.

A 12- to 15-month long project to widen more than a block of Ocean Street will begin in late May or early June, reported Public Works Director Larry Erwin Tuesday. The project is just north of Dakota Ave. and south of Soquel Avenue.

The \$777,000 project could turn the usual summer traffic headaches along Ocean Street into travelers' migraines, although Erwin said the project would be scheduled to keep summer-traffic disruption to a minimum.

The City Council Tuesday voted to hold a public hearing on proposed changes to the downtown traffic flow pattern.

The public hearing will be held May 14 on proposals to change two blocks of downtown into one way-streets: North Pacific Avenue between River and Water Streets, and Front Street between Water and River Street extension (just before Cooper Street.) Traffic would travel south (towards the beach).

Another proposal would remove stop signs from the River/North Pacific intersection.

The council tentatively agreed to ban parking on Beach Street between Washington and Third Streets from 2-5 a.m. Council members will hold a public hearing April 23 before making the decision

final. The city Traffic Commission recommended the parking ban.

Erwin said he would work with Ocean Street business owners to try to soften the blow to business during the construction period.

Erwin said crews would try to delay work — such as road surfacing — that is most disruptive to traffic flow until after the summer passes.

Preliminary work — widening of the Branciforte Creek channel and undergrounding utilities — will take place during the late spring and summer season, he said.

City officials hope to avoid a repeat of a situation that occurred over a year ago during a roadwork project on Mission Street.

At that time, Mission Street business owners complained the roadwork was blocking their driveways and parking spots. The problems were eventually ironed out between the business owners, city and state Department of Transportation officials, but only after businesses reported losses caused by the disruption.

Erwin said notices would be mailed to businesses on Ocean Street before work begins. Council members voted to direct Erwin to work with businesses to address project-related problems.

The city will pay an estimated \$107,000 for the Ocean Street project. The Federal Aid Urban Project will pay \$661,000.

The council awarded the project contract to the lowest bidder, Granite Construction Co. of Watsonville.

Council members agreed with a proposal from the Metropolitan Transit District, Downtown and Traffic Com-

Please see back of section

## Traffic woes

Continued from Page A1

missions, to move the bus stop on Front Street in front of the Bank of America parking lot to Soquel Avenue near the Long's Drug Stores parking lot.

Today, buses block traffic as drivers make left-hand turns from Soquel Avenue east onto Front Street.

Long-range plans call for another left-hand turn lane on Soquel Avenue in front of Long's.

Council members agreed to remove five parking meters on west Front Street between Soquel Avenue and Cathcart Street. The meters will be removed after the new bus stop is in place.

Removing the meters will help solve

traffic merging problems, said Erwin.

Council members directed the Public Works Department to move forward with plans to replace street lights on Beach Street and to fix the bicycle and pedestrian path at two points near Lighthouse Point.

Waves have eroded the path, said Erwin.

Proposed changes in the downtown traffic pattern follow the guidelines of the Downtown Area Plan, adopted last year after a series of public meetings involving representatives from businesses, neighborhoods, transportation and other interest groups.

Still undecided is whether River Street will be widened from the Highway 1/High-

way 9 intersection to North Pacific Avenue.

Consultants for a traffic study for the Harvey West area have suggested the widening of this section of River Street.

The Downtown Area Plan calls for River Street, not Ocean Street, to become the main inroad to downtown. Signs will be posted to direct motorists to use River Street as an entrance to downtown and to the wharf/beach area, said Erwin.

According to the plan, drivers coming into town via River Street would face a decision at River/North Pacific Avenue. Signs would direct drivers to take North Pacific to reach the heart of downtown; or to take River Street — which eventually leads into Front Street — to reach the beach or wharf.

Councilman Arnold Levine said he was concerned River Street could not handle any more traffic, unless it were widened.

Plans call for River Street and River Street extension to continue to be two-way, said Traffic Engineer Jim Helmer.

This confused council members. Councilmen John Laird and Spiro Mellis both said they thought a section of River Street was going to be made one-way, along with the two blocks of North Pacific and Front Street, to achieve a one-way loop downtown.

City staff told them this is not part of the current plans.

Plans call for drivers returning from the beach to face another choice at the River/Water intersection.

Drivers could stay on River Street, and leave town that way; or turn and cross the Water Street bridge to leave town via Ocean Street. Signs will be posted to that effect, said Erwin.

Upon questioning from Laird, Erwin said there may be enough project savings this fiscal year to partially pay for the synchronization of some traffic signals at major intersections. Erwin estimated the savings could amount to \$50,000 to \$60,000.

Laird has been pushing for traffic-signal synchronization for years.