

Wider Highway 1 demanded

Highways
Panel OKs project 8-2; threatens to squeeze other spending

Highway 1 vote

On Thursday night, the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission approved a long-range plan covering spending and projects for the next quarter-century. In doing so, commissioners singled out widening Highway 1 as their priority.

This is how the vote broke down:

YES: Jeff Almquist, Jan Beautz, Ellen Pirie, Bruce Gabriel, Randy Johnson, Mike Keogh, Rafael Lopez, Dennis Norton.

NO: Mardi Wormhoudt, Tim Fitzmaurice.

By **STETT HOLBROOK**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ — Nothing is more important than widening Highway 1.

That's the decision the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission made Thursday as it voted on an amended 25-year transportation plan.

After five months of discussion and public hearings, the commission elevated widening the highway from one of many priorities to its sole priority. The vote was 8-2.

"This is a step in recognition of the reality of where we are," said Commissioner Jan Beautz, who said highway congestion not only slows commutes but creates safety hazards, impeding emergency vehi-

cles.

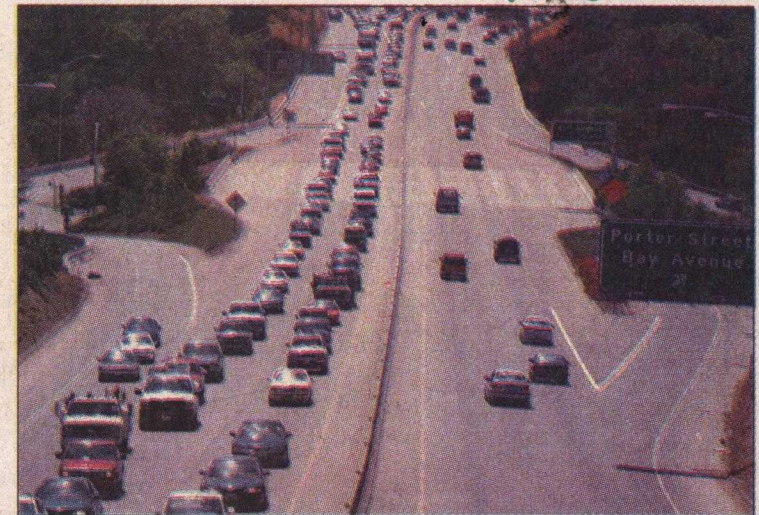
"Highway 1 needs to be a priority. ... Everything else kind of feeds into this."

In approving the transportation plan, the commission agreed to add language suggested by Beautz that makes widening Highway 1 the touchstone of all transportation projects.

Her motion reads in part: "Discretionary funds shall be allotted to other projects only when such use is determined by the commission to not be inconsistent with the timely fulfillment of this highest priority."

It will be up to the commission to define what projects are inconsistent. Beautz, who is also a county

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Opponents say widening Highway 1 will do little to ease the traffic congestion now usual on the busy artery, but eight of 10 traffic commissioners and most of those at the meeting Thursday demanded a wider road.

Shmuel Thaler/
Sentinel

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supervisor, said making Highway 1 a priority does not mean other transportation will be ignored but the new language will give the agency the flexibility to decide how it spends money and ensure enough of it is going toward the widening project.

She said county residents have grown weary of studies and want action. Most of the commissioners agreed with her.

"We have to move forward in a stronger way that makes it clear this is going to happen," said Commissioner Ellen Pirie, who also serves on the county Board of Supervisors.

Commissioner Rafael Lopez, who is a Watsonville City Council member, said widening Highway 1 will not solve all the county's transportation needs but it's long overdue.

"Highway widening is planning for what did not happen decades ago," he said.

Jim Conklin, executive director of the Santa Cruz County Business Council, has been one of the prime movers behind a campaign to widen the highway. He was thrilled by the commission's action.

"I think we've got some focus now," he said. "Last night eight votes said we want to stop talking about it, and we want to start doing something about it."

Commissioners Tim Fitzmaurice and Mardi Wormhoudt cast the two votes against the plan. While both oppose widening, they supported the original transportation plan as a balanced, multi-modal approach.

Fitzmaurice, Santa Cruz mayor, strongly opposed the commission's new direction. He said widening the highway will not alleviate congestion and narrowing the agency's priorities down to one was "a real error."

Cheaper, less time-consuming projects such as ramp metering would be more effective, he said.

Wormhoudt, who represents Santa Cruz on the Board of Supervisors, said any benefits from highway widening would be short-lived.

The public, many of whom came to the meeting at the behest of the business council, overwhelmingly supported widening.

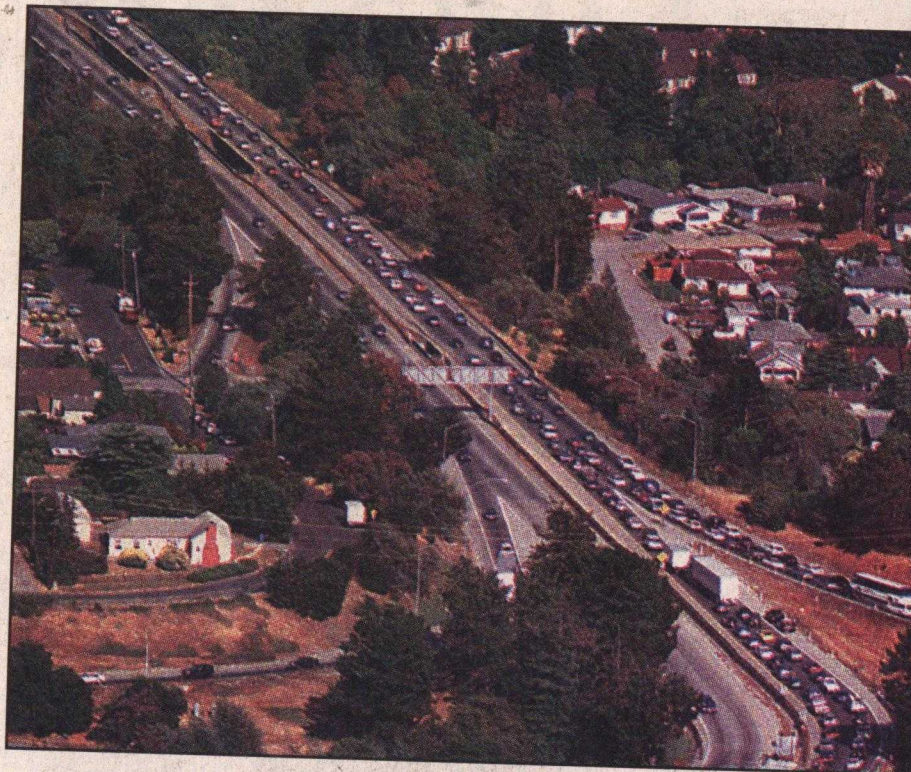
Bruce Woolpert, president of the business council and chief executive officer for Granite Rock, said the commission staff suffered from "leadership paralysis" because they have not received clear direction from the commissioners on Highway 1.

Santa Cruz resident Peter Scott was one of the few speakers who opposed highway widening. He said he appreciated the plight of those idling in traffic, but said other widening projects have shown the road will fill up again once it was widened.

"Then what?" he asked.

How the commission will pay for the work is unclear. Most commissioners agree the public will have to kick in with some kind of local sales or gas tax. There are no cost estimates yet.

The transportation plan approved Thursday sets the long-range spending and pro-



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

The afternoon commute backs up at the Fishhook on Highway 1.

ject priorities for commission until 2025. The agency last updated its plan seven years ago. The plan includes a wide range of projects, from bike lanes and road resurfacing to highway widening and carpool programs.

While the panel made highway widening its top priority, it left funding priorities for

previously approved projects intact.

The transportation plan also includes a "wish list" of unfunded projects but they may have to wait in line behind Highway 1.

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