

Caltrans revises plan for Fishhook

^{Highways} Opposition prompts redesign of Highway 1-17 interchange _{6.6.97}

By NANCY CHIN
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — In response to public outcry, Caltrans unveiled Thursday a revised Fishhook plan that even the harshest critics applauded.

Among the new features are the lowering of the "flyover" of southbound Highway 17 over southbound Highway 1, and shifting the proposed Ocean Street bridge away from neighborhoods.

Linda Wilshusen, executive director of the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission, cautioned that the revised plan remains tentative as engineers continue to study options.

The modified plan presented Thursday came after the previous redesign to improve the notorious interchange drew heated opposition. Last week, the Santa Cruz City Council voted to recommend it be nixed.

But after Thursday's meeting, Santa Cruz City Councilman Scott Kennedy — who also is a transportation commissioner — said he was pleased with the latest changes.

"This looks good to me," he said in an interview after the commission finished its discussion. "This addresses 90 percent of what I was concerned about."

Together with commissioner and Santa Cruz Councilwoman Katherine Beiers, he had urged the council to stop the project. The council voted unanimously to reject it.

Critics objected to the proposed Fishhook redesign, saying the concrete structure did not fit with the image of Santa Cruz County, nor did anything to alleviate congestion. Residents of neighborhoods near the interchange were con-

New Fishhook plan

Caltrans' new plan for the Highway 1-Highway 17 interchange:

- Lowers the 'flyover' of southbound Highway 17 over southbound Highway 1
- Shifts the proposed Ocean Street bridge away from neighborhoods
- May eliminate the need for a 40-foot-high sound wall

cerned about increased noise, the height of sound walls and removal of trees.

Caltrans went back to the drawing board. The state now has slated a less imposing flyover. Instead of a 40-foot-high triple-level interchange, there will be a 25-foot high bi-level structure. Traffic from southbound Highway 17 will have its own lane as it merges with southbound Highway 1, forming three lanes at that point. That lane will extend to the bridge at Market Street, where the highway will narrow back to its current two lanes.

Also, lowering and shifting the northbound 1 bridge over Ocean Street may possibly eliminate the need for a 40-foot-high sound wall that was to be built.

Engineers will continue to fine-tune the design and present it to the commission in September, when a public hearing on the topic would be held.

Commissioners also voted to hold another public hearing in the Mid-County area that month. "The majority of us who drive the Fishhook are not from Santa Cruz," said Commissioner Walt Symons.

Please see FISHHOOK — BACK PAGE

Fishhook

Continued from Page A1

who is also a county supervisor. "They're from Mid-County and South County who commute over the hill. This meeting should not be convenient just for the people in Santa Cruz."

Plans to make the Fishhook safer began in 1985, when the local transportation commission asked Caltrans to study the notorious junction. The interchange was found to have an accident rate five times that of the state average.

Public meetings have been held and a redesign plan was chosen from several alternatives last year. Construction is to begin in 2000 and take three years to complete. So far, \$2 million has been spent on the project. Stage I is expected

to cost \$30.8 million.

Caltrans project coordinator Mike Grantham agreed to the upcoming meetings but said he was concerned that this would delay an already slow-moving process. "Caltrans runs the risk of taking a lot of flak," he said in an interview during the meeting. "We are always accused of delivering projects late. We thought we had all these issues settled years ago. We didn't intend on having any more public hearings. We keep opening it back up."

Backtracking a bit will cost no money but mean delaying completion of the project four to six months, he added.

Once the final plan is approved by the commission, Caltrans plans to schedule neighborhood meetings

to discuss such things as sound walls, landscaping and other aesthetics. A facilitator will be hired for \$10,000 to conduct the meetings.

In the meantime, opponents of the proposed redesign thanked Caltrans for listening to the community's concerns. Some have banded together, forming the Coalition for an Improved Fishhook. The alliance includes residents from surrounding neighborhoods and meets weekly, said Eloise Graham, organizer of the group. An Internet page on the World Wide Web also is in the works to keep residents informed of the latest developments, she said.

On Thursday, she too was optimistic. "I am just thrilled that Caltrans is looking into our concerns and taking them seriously."