



A haven for surfers like Craig Lambert, Santa Cruz is known for its laid-back way of life.

LESS STRESS — AT A PRICE

Santa Cruz County voters to decide whether better traffic flow is worth tax hike, environmental impact



PATRICK TEHAN — MERCURY NEWS PHOTOGRAPHS

But the area is also becoming known for freeway snarls that threaten the area's image as paradise.

Highways - 2000

By Ken McLaughlin
Mercury News

Santa Cruz considers itself heaven on earth, but many residents say that holding on to that notion is turning it into a high-stress hell.

Known worldwide for its waves and laid-back ways, Santa Cruz has become so notorious for its traffic that the county is nudging the Top 10 list of the most stressful mid-size places to live in America.

The main source of the problem: gridlock on Highway 1 for hours every day.

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One solution: Widen the northern stretch of the freeway to six lanes.

But many Santa Cruz residents believe that paradise cannot include six-lane thoroughfares — they belong on the “other side of the hill.”

The stress-increasing debate is expected to make its way to the ballot this November, when voters will decide whether to raise the county sales tax to fund the widening. These days, “Surf City” is reworking the lyrics of that old Jan and

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Dean song: "Stress City, here we come."

Proponents of widening Highway 1 claim their foes care so much about image and so little about reality that they'd rather inch along in traffic. Many environmentalists counter that widening the freeway will only attract more cars.

Other environmental advocates, however, contend that today's choked freeway results in more pollution, as trucks and cars idling away on the freeway pour chemicals into the air.

John Robinson, a longtime Santa Cruz resident and surfer, said he's tired of hearing people argue that building new roads and adding new highway lanes will destroy Santa Cruz's soul.

"They're going to save the soul of Santa Cruz and kill the body," Robinson said.

Still, "Stress City?" Come on.

It's no joke, said Bert Sperling, president of Portland-based Sperling's Best Places guide, which recently rated Santa Cruz County as the nation's 13th most stressful mid-size metropolitan area, out of 114 surveyed. The rating puts Santa Cruz in the company of the gritty Rust Belt city of Flint, Mich.

Traffic weighs heavily in the Sperling Stress Index, largely because it's so important to the quality of life and mental health, researchers say.

"When people say why they're moving from a place, one of the biggest reasons we



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Lynnelle Wing, who lives in Live Oak, east of Santa Cruz, but teaches in San Jose, and her partner, Derek Williams, advocate cycling and other alternatives to driving. The apartment she rents in Milpitas to be closer to her school makes her commute "so much less frazzling."

the late 1970s.

The stretch of Highway 1 between the scary "fishhook" interchange of highways 1 and 17 was built a half-century ago when the county's population was a quarter of what it is today. The most congested part of the freeway — the stretch from Santa Cruz to Aptos — is only two lanes in each direction.

On Tuesday, the board of supervisors is set to place on the November ballot a \$577 million measure that would add one lane in each direction from Morrissey Boulevard, near the fishhook, to Larkin Valley Road, a distance of 8¼ miles.

The new lanes would be reserved for buses and carpoolers during commute times.

The congestion on Highway 1 has turned surface streets such as Soquel Avenue into traffic hot spots. At least a third of the money raised from the 30-year, half-cent sales tax increase would be dedicated to fixing local streets and alternative transportation projects such as

bike and pedestrian paths.

Another source of Surf City stress is traffic on residential streets that lead to the University of California-Santa Cruz. And the school is projected to grow from 15,000 to 21,000 students in the next 15 years. A road through the Pogonip, part of the city's greenbelt, was planned 40 years ago, but today that area is considered sacred turf.

"I'm a lifelong member of the Sierra Club, but I see a disconnect between philosophy and aspirations and reality," said John Aird, whose home sits at High Street and Highland Avenue, ground zero in the campus traffic debate.

At peak traffic times "a car goes by my house every 3½ seconds," the 20-year resident said.

Those who oppose building new roads and freeway lanes, such as Live Oak resident Lynnelle Wing, say county residents have to try harder to avoid driving. Wing, a teacher at Brooktree Elementary School in San Jose's Berryessa district, rented a room in Milpi-



Opponents to the proposed widening of Highway 1 worry about the project's potential impact on the area's environment.

tas to have more time to prep for her fourth-grade class. During the school year, she lives in the room during the week.

"It's so much less frazzling," said Wing, whose partner, mechanical designer Derek Williams, avoids Highway 1 by biking from Live Oak — an unincorporated area east of Santa Cruz — to his job with Raytek on the Westside.

But many proponents of wid-

ening Highway 1 contend it is selfish for those who can avoid the congestion on Highway 1 to ignore the plight of those who depend on the route for their jobs — and emergencies.

A few years ago, that point was driven home for the Rev. Herb Schmidt, who had fought road-widening decades ago in the battles to save the landmark Lighthouse Field. Rush-hour traffic en route to Domini-



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UNLUCKY 13? MOST STRESSFUL MID-SIZE CITIES

Santa Cruz County was recently rated the nation's 13th most stressful mid-size metropolitan area (population 200,000 to 500,000) by Sperling's Best Places. The company bases its ratings on data that includes commute times and jobless, suicide and divorce rates.

1. Galveston-Texas City, Texas
2. Flint, Mich.
3. Fort Pierce-Port St. Lucie, Fla.
4. Bremerton, Wash.
5. Beaumont-Port Arthur, Texas
6. Lakeland-Winter Haven, Fla.
7. Daytona Beach, Fla.
8. Modesto
9. Brazoria, Texas
10. Shreveport-Bossier City, La.
11. Salem, Ore.
12. Spokane, Wash.
13. SANTA CRUZ COUNTY
14. Olympia, Wash.
15. Melbourne-Titusville-Palm Bay, Fla.

OTHERS IN CALIFORNIA

49. Santa Rosa
52. Salinas

San Jose placed 56th out of 100 major metropolitan areas (population more than 500,000) on the Sperling Stress Index.

Source: Sperling's Best Places

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get is, 'I an't put up with the traffic anymore,'" said Sperling, noting that Santa Cruz County also has high rates of suicide and divorce.

At the heart of the traffic debate is the county's longtime practice of limiting growth by not widening roads — a policy that has pretty much remained sacrosanct since green, left-of-center elected officials began dominating county politics in

can Hospital caused him to miss being at the bedside of a dying person. He now supports widening Highway 1.

"In 1960, driving was so easy," said Schmidt, who sometimes longs for the days when Santa Cruz was a sleepy little beach town. "It was paradise."

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