

# SC council votes against Fishhook plan

Highways  
By KAREN CLARK  
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — Opponents of the large highway-interchange project proposed as a way to straighten out the notorious Fishhook got some high-powered support Tuesday from the City Council.

In a unanimous vote, the council asked the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission to reject the \$30-million-plus state-funded Fishhook project, which is expected to begin construction in 2000 and take three years to complete.

"It would be just plunking urban blight right down in the middle of Santa Cruz ... without really improving traffic congestion," said Vice Mayor Celia Scott.

Phase 1 of the project, which the state funded in 1990 at the request of the regional transportation board, calls for the Fishhook to be demolished. In its place would be a 40-foot-tall overpass that merges southbound Highway 17 to southbound Highway 1. Fourteen retaining walls — ranging from 5 to 30 feet tall — also would be built along Highway 1 near neighborhoods.

Hundreds of trees would be removed, to be replaced with \$1.7

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million worth of landscaping and other cosmetics. In fact, more than 28 acres of landscaping would be replaced.

Neighbors have come out in droves against the project, which they said is completely out of scale to the Santa Cruz ambience, would require too many trees to be removed and would not solve any of the congestion problems that frustrate drivers.

Proponents, however, have pointed out that the interchange would make driving that dangerous route safer, which is why the regional transportation board sought state funding in the first place.

Linda Wilshusen, executive director of the regional transportation board, said it is possible to stop the project if that's what board members decide.

Such a decision would come after a public hearing is scheduled, and the outcome would be delivered to the California Transportation Commission, which decides what projects will be funded each year.

"They take the regional recommendations pretty seriously," said Wilshusen. "They might question

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(the change of heart) ... but a lot of time has gone by."

The project has been funded for seven years, but construction design plans still have not been prepared by Caltrans.

"It shows that when you have a lot of delays, priorities change," said Wilshusen. "This is the risk that you end up with."

The process the regional board would take if it agrees with the Santa Cruz City Council's recommendation would be to ask the state commission to use the funds set aside for the Fishhook project for the region's new 1998 improvement plan instead.

Wilshusen cautioned, however, that the regional board's decision would be a controversial one.

"I think a lot of people in the county like this project," said Wilshusen, pointing out that the large number of safety concerns is the reason the regional board asked the state to fund the project in the first place. "It will be a big issue at the county level."

But City Council members said addressing those safety issues with a project of this scale simply was unacceptable.

"I think I was caught like a lot of neighbors ... who didn't know about it until the public session (in April)," said Councilwoman Katherine Beiers. "My gosh, this is way beyond anything anyone imagined."

The council said it expected the regional transportation board to take its concerns seriously because "The major environmental impacts of the Fishhook project will be, of

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course, in the city of Santa Cruz and several of its neighborhoods."

In a letter to the council, Beiers and Councilman Scott Kennedy said, "The idea of constructing a very high, wide, ugly freeway overpass which will not ease traffic congestion at the cost of \$30 million (and eventually \$66 million) makes no sense."

Phase 2 of the project could cost an additional \$36 million. Some of the latter phase's provisions, however, including a pedestrian/bicycle overpass, a park-and-ride lot

and widening the bridge over the San Lorenzo River, appealed to the council. Members asked the regional board to try to salvage those provisions.

In terms of the safety issues, council members suggested that Caltrans should explore the idea that additional signs, signals, lighting and other measures would adequately address those concerns.

The council also was concerned

that the interchange was the first step in the anticipated widening of Highway 1 from four to six lanes from the Fishhook to Capitola/Soquel.

"It is not too late to stop the Fishhook project," said the Beiers/Kennedy letter. "The City Council should take the lead ... sparing city residents (from) having to gear up to stop a project which promises them noise and visual blight and removal of hundreds of mature trees while offering no improvement of traffic congestion."

Wilshusen said the regional board will have to act quickly if it wants to change the 1998 regional transportation-improvement plan, which currently is being devel-

oped.

"The interchange serves a lot of people in the county, and everyone is concerned about safety," said Wilshusen, pointing out that the board will have a difficult decision to make. "The fact a region would change its mind on a very significant project like this, I think we'll have some mending to do on our relationship (with the state commission and Caltrans)."

Ironically, three members of the 10-member regional board are from the Santa Cruz City Council.

The board's June 5 agenda has been set, and there will be no July meeting. So the first time the board could hear the council's proposal (other than at a special meeting) would be August.