

✓ Bridge delays weighed

Drivers frustrated during construction

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SANTA CRUZ — City officials are struggling to ease the sluggish traffic and interminable queues caused by the work on the Water Street bridge.

"We're still trying to fine-tune the signal times to make it better," said Chris Schneider, assistant director of the city Public Works Department. "It's one of those things where you change it a little and watch it a lot."

The bottleneck is expected to last until February as work continues on the 60-year-old bridge over the San Lorenzo River.

A seismic upgrade is the first phase of the \$4.5 million project, under way for nearly two months. During the second phase, the northern part of the bridge will be replaced to match improvements already made on the southern portion.

Fine-tuning traffic lights isn't the only way to unclog traffic in the area, Schneider said.

Within the next week, crews will restripe the northbound lanes on River Street at the Water Street intersection to include both a straight and right-turn lane. Schneider said that will make the signal run faster, which would reduce queuing on Water Street.

In addition, a left-turn arrow will be painted more clearly on the second left-turn lane that was recently fashioned on the Water Street intersection for cars turning onto Pacific Avenue or Front Street.

Crews established the second left-turn lane there because no turns are allowed from Water Street onto River Street during bridge construction.

But drivers have found it confusing, and many sit unknowingly in the new left-turn lane when they intend to go straight. That holds up drivers behind them, and causes a problem when they try to merge with drivers crossing the intersection.

"I'm a careful driver ... but many drivers are on autopilot and are used to how traffic used to be," said Carol Bridge, who works near the Water Street-Pacific Avenue intersection and has seen dozens of drivers hold up traffic by sitting in the wrong lane. "It's not only a matter of smooth traffic flow, but there's going to be a collision there soon."

Schneider said the city had tried unsuccessfully for weeks to get contractors to paint the second left-turn arrow to help drivers understand the new lane configuration. City crews now will do the job at the end of the week or early next week.