

No commute problem — yet

Highway 17 landslide danger remains

By KEITH MURAOKA
Sentinel staff writer

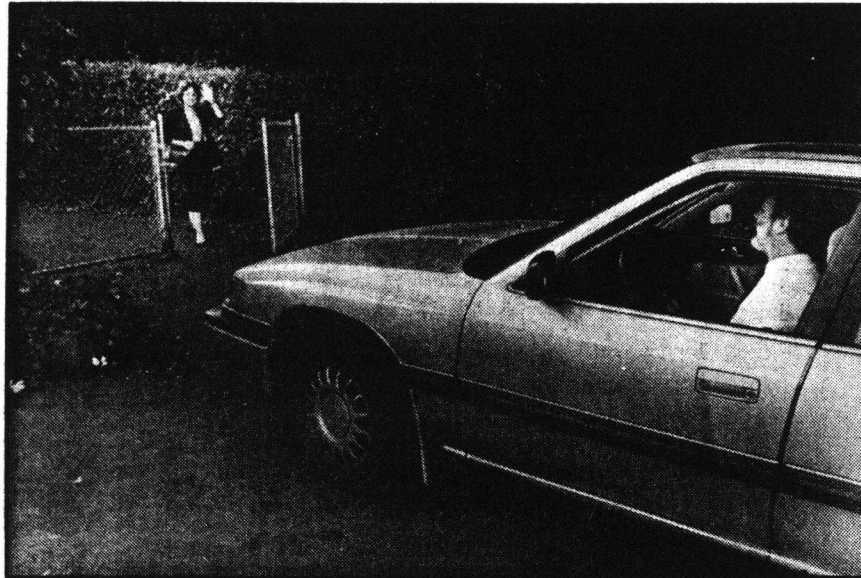
SANTA CRUZ — There were plenty of smiles all the way around Monday on Highway 17 as it reopened for the first time in more than a month to normal, unrestricted commuter traffic.

Highway Patrol Capt. Steve Ellis reported no major problems and lighter-than-normal traffic on the 11-mile mountainous roadway between Scotts Valley and Los Gatos, which had been blocked by earthquake-caused landslides.

However, even amid all the smiles, the chief engineer on the \$5-million repair project warned that the danger of additional landslides will continue into the traditional rainy season.

California Department of Transportation engineer Dan Kimberly said Monday that erosion-control work continues on the steeper hillsides. That involves some of the most visible changes to the highway — namely, spraying earth-holding seed and mulch on hillsides and anchoring it with both a fiber netting and wire mesh.

"Any type of normal rain and we should be OK," Kimberly said. "But, if we were to get four or five inches of rain in a short period of time, I don't know. A lot depends on how severe the rains are."



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Kathy Cytron carools to Los Gatos from Soquel with Marc Reinig.

Cruz County residents who commute over Highway 17 to Silicon Valley may not have known Highway 17 had reopened, said commuters Marc Reinig of Soquel and Paul Elerick of Aptos. Some car-poolers also continued to share rides and still others probably took this pre-Thanksgiving holiday week off.

For much of the past month, the highway has only been open to Highway Patrol-led convoys of car-poolers for eight hours daily.

Both Reinig and Elerick estimated Monday morning's commute was about 50 percent less crowded than pre-quake days.

Reinig, who works at a small high-tech company in San Jose, returned to

actually getting home earlier now because I can't schedule clients late because of my carpool."

For others like Elerick, though, the highway reopening was a return to driving alone.

Elerick, who works at IBM in San Jose, said he jumped into his car and was at work within an hour.

"I tried carpooling back in the gas-line days of the '70s," Elerick added. "It just wasn't feasible for me. The timing wasn't right, and it was too restrictive."

For others, it was back to buses, despite the reopening.

Cherie Collister of Mt. Hermon took the bus to San Jose from the Scotts Valley area and said she was

this and start driving by ourselves again."

Collister helped turned in more than 1,100 signatures on petitions Monday to the County Center, in hopes of retaining the over-the-hill bus service.

Michelle Waugh, a spokeswoman for the Santa Clara County Transportation Agency — which began operating the emergency bus service in cooperation with the Santa Cruz Metropolitan Transit District — said it will continue at least through Dec. 1. Talks will also soon begin on the possibility of making at least some of the routes permanent.

The Highway 17 repair-project included the removal of an estimated 250,000 cubic yards of debris — enough to fill more than 27,000 nine-yard dump trucks, said Caltrans' Kimberly.

"We're overjoyed we got it open," he said. "We really had two things in mind all along — to make the road safe again and to get the darn thing open as quick as possible."

Highway Patrol Capt. Ellis added, "We're happy to be out of the car pool-convo business."

The reopening, which actually occurred Sunday, came a month earlier than originally anticipated, thanks to 24-hour-a-day work and less damage than feared.

The landslide-removal work featured grading the steeper hillsides into a more-gradual decline than before, Kimberly said.

Besides the erosion-control work, which is highly visible along Highway 17, motorists are noticing patches of new pavement and new sections of concrete median barriers. Kimberly said