

Highway 17 workers celebrate end of a job

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SCOTTS VALLEY — It took a little more than a month to move a mountain, out there on Highway 17 following the Oct. 17 earthquake. It took the coordination of local, county and state agencies, and it took the cooperation of thousands of individuals.

There were CalTrans workers, who spent days, nights, weekends on the colossal task of road repairs, lane closures, traffic control.

There were California Highway Patrol Officers, who led convoys of commuters across to jobs, who turned away solo commuters trying to slip past the restrictions.

There were transit officials from both Santa Cruz and Santa Clara and there were local government officials who are still trying to help their districts solve the multitude of problems that shook loose during the quake.

About 70 of the people involved with putting Highway 17 back together gathered Thursday to celebrate the re-opening of the road that links Santa Clara and Santa Cruz counties.

"When I first saw the massive slides up on Highway 17 two days after the earthquake, I envisioned a long winter of commuters trying to use alternate routes to get to their jobs," said Linda Wilshusen, executive director of the Santa Cruz County Transportation Commission, host of the event. "On Oct. 19, I would have said this would be impossible, but they did it — and at the same time, they were able to open up that bridge in the Bay Area, too!"

There was talk of the past, and earthquake stories were abundant, even from state Sen. Henry Mello.

"At the time of the earthquake my wife and I were in Sacramento

and of course we hurried home," he said. "Highway 17 was closed, Highway 1, closed; Hecker Pass, closed ... if it wasn't for having been born in Watsonville and knowing some of the back roads, we wouldn't have been able to get home."

Mello thanked everyone involved in the early re-opening of Highway 17 and urged CalTrans onward.

"I'm glad we got this road open — now on to Struve Slough, we've got to get that open next!"

The problems facing the work crews were staggering — not just figuring out how to dig out Highway 17, pave the cracks, repair the cement median dividers, install new erosion control, shore up an underpass and help people at the summit get back into their homes. There was the commuters to deal with as well. Agencies worked frantically to get a plan together by Monday following the earthquake, said Zoe Lofgren, Santa Clara

County Supervisor.

The hastily thrown-together transit system looks like it may be around for a while longer, according to Santa Cruz Metropolitan Transit District's John Laird.

"Legislators like myself have been debating over whether to have mandatory or voluntary transit service over the hill, but Mother Nature took over and made up our minds for us," Laird said. "I hope we can find a way to keep it going so people can depend on it."

Laird said about 200 people are still using the service daily, even though restrictions on commuters have been lifted.

In the immediate days after the quake, special permits for mountain resident were issued, allowing residents onto the closed highway.

"The population on the summit swelled to 120,000 over that first weekend," said CHP Capt. Steve Ellis said as he presented honorary

permits to CalTrans officials Dan Kimberly and Bob Tucker. "I think some of my officers must have been selling these things!"

When the highway was opened to car-poolers only, the excuses grew even more creative as commuters tried to beat the rules.

"I had a lady come by in a wedding dress, said she was going to get married in an hour and if she didn't get through she was going to be late," said George Butler, maintenance supervisor for CalTrans. "I guess she didn't get married because I didn't let her through — she wasn't a resident."

Ellis said the stress on the officers was incredible, facing upset commuters day after day, and one finally cracked.

"We had one of the guys during the convoy when people were get-

ting a little upset, a little uptight," Ellis said. "He got a tape recording of Dionne Warwick's 'Do You Know the Way To San Jose?', pulled up to the head of the convoy, got on the speaker and said, 'OK, everybody sing!' "

Sgt. Al Voight of the Highway Patrol also worked the "front lines" on the hill.

"We had a gal come up with a blow-up doll, a phony," he said. "She got turned around. We had a guy with a doctor's prescription that said he had to drive Highway 17 for one reason or another — he got turned around."

Voight said they turned back probably 25 percent of the people who tried to get over the hill, especially on the weekend.

"The tourists!" he said, rolling his eyes heavenward.

REFERENCE