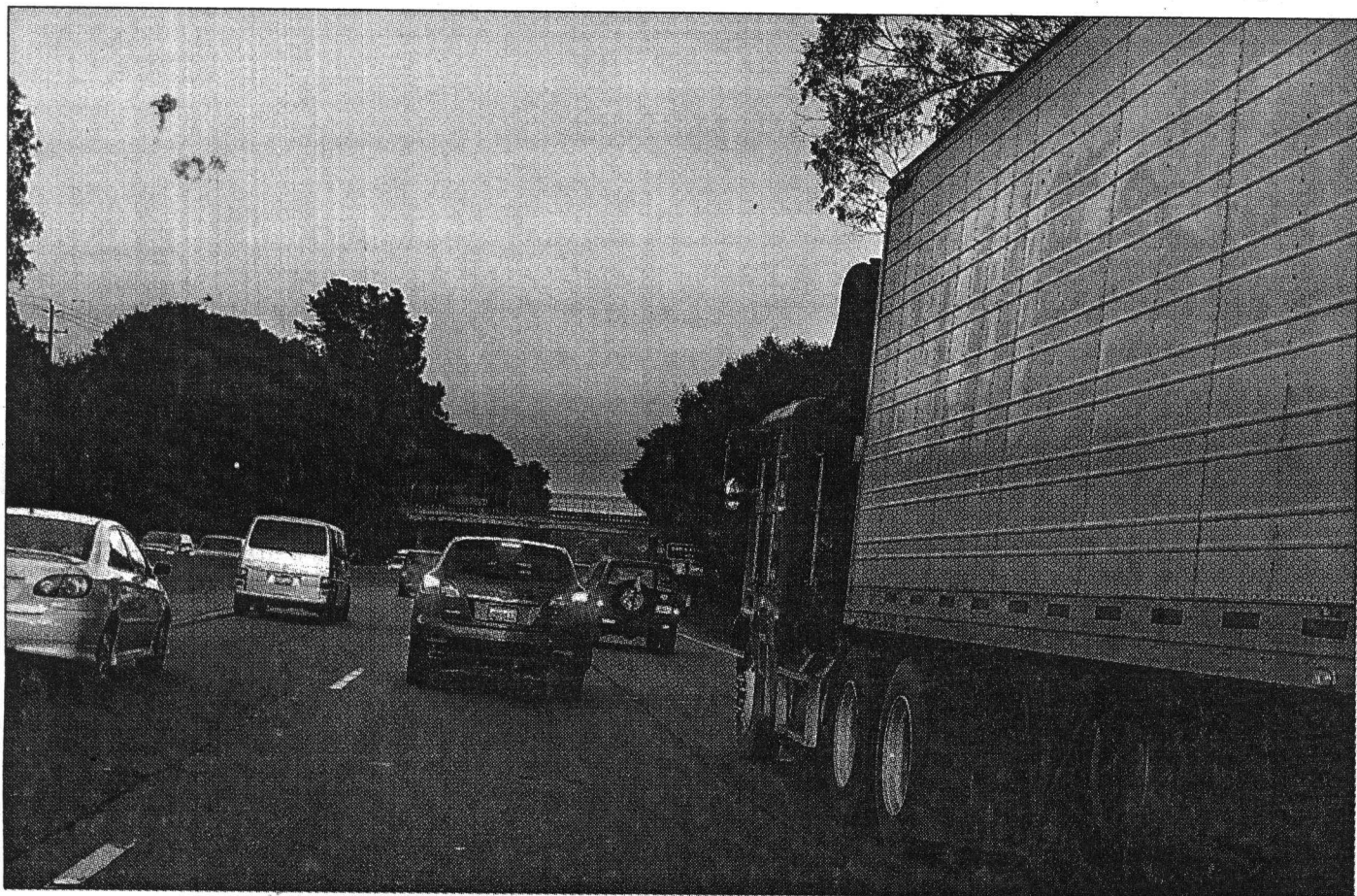


Expansion gets the green light

RTC signs off on \$18 million project to add exit lanes between Soquel, Morrissey



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL

Southbound Highway 1 traffic merges from three lanes to two just north of the La Fonda Avenue Bridge on Thursday.

By JASON HOPPIN

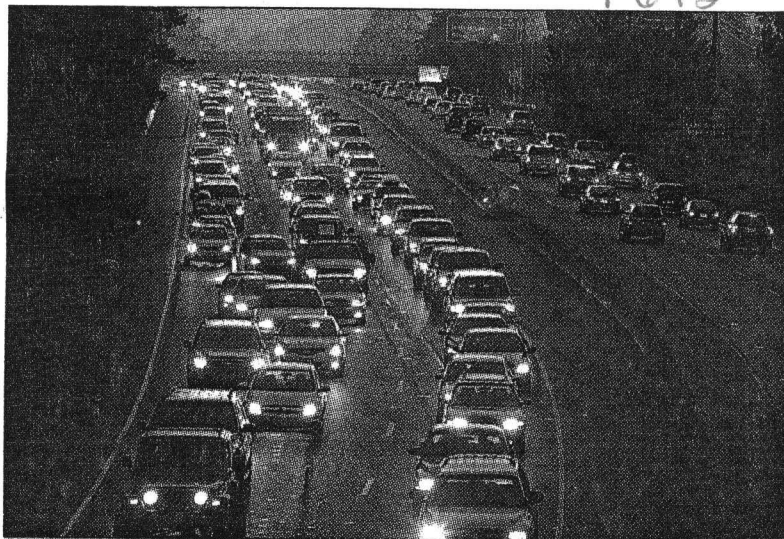
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County transportation officials Thursday gave the green light to expand one of the most congested stretches of highway in the region, ending another chapter in an ongoing debate about automobiles and the environment.

The \$18 million project adds exit lanes between Morrissey Boulevard and Soquel Drive along Highway 1, widening a one-mile stretch of asphalt where traffic often bottlenecks during commute hours. About 100,000 cars pass through the area daily.

"I'm just really so happy we've gotten to this point," said Ellen Pirie, a member of the county Regional Transportation Commission. "I wasn't sure it was ever going to happen."

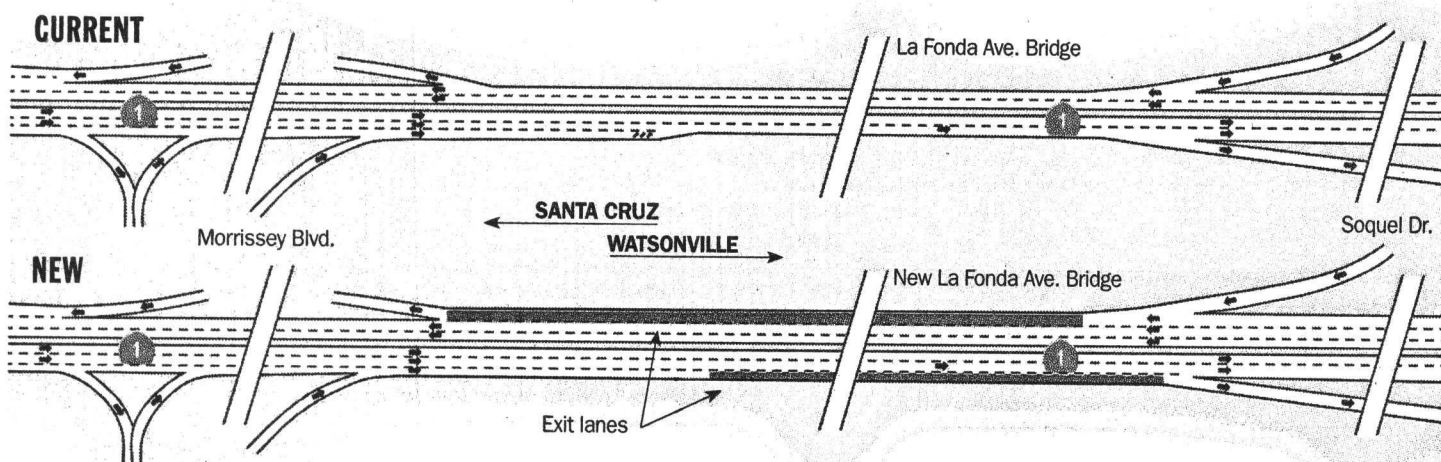
It is the first major freeway project the commission has overseen, and builds on previous traffic improvements to the Highway 1 and Highway 17 interchange. It also lays the groundwork for further expansion projects south along Highway 1.



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL

Afternoon rush hour comes to a halt Thursday where Highway 1 narrows from three lanes to two just south of Morrissey Boulevard. Preliminary work to widen the highway to three lanes to the Soquel Avenue exit will begin shortly.

SEE HIGHWAY ON A2



ANTHONY L. SOLIS/SENTINEL

HIGHWAY

Continued from A1

But the project has been beset by controversy and delayed by litigation. Last year, the commission prevailed in a suit to halt the projects, setting the stage for Thursday's vote to award the contract for the job. The suit was one part of an ongoing debate over expanding Highway 1 or finding alternative ways to move people across the county.

"I really do wish that this money was instead being spent to create a sustainable transportation future for Santa Cruz County," said Jack Nelson, a member of the Campaign for Sensible Transportation, which filed the suit over the project.

The project not only adds exit lanes, but will include a new sound wall on the north

IF YOU GO

HIGHWAY 1 PROJECT KICKOFF MEETING

WHEN: 6:30-8:30 p.m.
(presentation 7-8 p.m.), Jan. 19

WHERE: DeLaveaga
Elementary School, 1145
Morrissey Blvd., Santa Cruz

DETAILS: <http://bit.ly/y59v6F>

side of the highway and the complete replacement of the La Fonda Avenue Bridge. Demolition of the bridge won't start until local schools let out for the summer, and could take six to eight months to complete.

Thursday's commission vote awarded a \$9.9 million construction contract to RGW Construction, a bid that came in 22 percent lower than estimated. The San Jose-based

company bested three other bidders, including local contractor Granite Construction.

A list of subcontractors submitted by RGW did not include any Santa Cruz County companies, disappointing many commissioners. Commission staff said that because state money is being used to pay for the project, there was little they could do to force bidders to sign up local companies.

"There's no hook, or carrot," said planner Kim Schultz, who is managing the project for the commission.

Work on the project could begin within weeks as contractors begin removing trees near the work site. That is needed to keep migratory birds from nesting near the construction zone, which would delay the project.

The removed trees will be replaced with hundreds of native trees, including coastal redwoods. The project is likely to be completed in March or

April of 2013.

During its first major highway project, the agency has taken steps to guard against cost overruns. It established a low, 5 percent contingency fund, and set up a system for approving any cost overruns.

Siobahn Saunders, a Caltrans engineer, told the commission that RGW Construction is a reputable firm. She said that some contractors clearly are low-balling bids and hoping to make up the difference with change orders, but hasn't seen that with RGW.

"I have no recollection of any job that stands out in my mind that they were doing anything like that," Saunders said.

Commissioner Greg Caput was the sole vote against the project. He raised a number of issues, including the lack of local subcontractors.

"It's just another example of where South County loses out," Caput said.