

Lone drivers barred from 17

10/29/89 Transportation

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SANTA CRUZ — Beginning Monday, solo drivers will not be allowed over Highway 17 at any time. The estimated 23,000 Santa Cruz County over-the-hill commuters must either double up, take some other route.

Car pools of two persons or more will continue to be led over the mountainous pass between Scotts Valley and Los Gatos by the Highway Patrol, but only between 5 a.m. and 9 a.m., and 3 p.m. and 7 p.m.

Trucks will be allowed to cross in convoys between 8 p.m. and 4 a.m.

The only exceptions to the solo-driver prohibition will be to Summit-area residents, buses and emergency vehicles, which will be permitted access at all times.

Highway Patrol Capt. Steve Ellis said the change was made because of the "mammoth construction job" that the California Department of Transportation is doing to clear numerous landslides left over from the Oct. 17 earthquake.

"We had been leading convoys of vehicles all day long," Ellis said. "But then, we'd get stopped by Caltrans' flagmen, and 300 or 400

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cars would back up sitting right in the middle of the construction zone."

The primary problem involves the massive landslide near Laurel Curve, said Caltrans Public Information Officer Greg Bayol.

"Crews have to push material down the slopes in order to clear a bench area for equipment, which will work on the removal of the slide," Bayol said. "This material rolls down the slope over the median barrier and onto southbound lanes. Therefore, it is necessary to stop traffic to remove this debris."

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Closing the highway during non-commute times will expedite the work, he added. Ellis estimated that the new restrictions will be in effect "at least through November."

Today will be the final chance for motorists to traverse Highway 17 at all times. The two-person minimum will not be enforced today, but — starting Monday — Ellis warned, "Solo drivers will not be allowed no matter what tale of woe. In fact, we won't even have time to listen to the tale of woe."

Alternatives to Highway 17 include: Highway 9 through the San Lorenzo Valley to Bear Creek Road and over to Highway 17; Highway 1 north to Half Moon Bay and Highway 92 to Interstate 280, Highway 1 north to Highway 84 and east on Highway 84 to Interstate 280, Highway 1 south to Highway 152 in Watsonville to Highway 101; and Highway 1 south to Salinas Road and then to Highway 101 via San Juan Road.

Highway 9 is closed to residents only due to a slide.

Highway 1 is expected to remain closed in Watsonville at the Harkins Slough bridge for eight to 10 months, according to Caltrans officials. Through-traffic motorists are now being detoured at the Larkin Valley exit to San Andreas and Beach roads rather than through Watsonville. Motorists who wish to get to Watsonville may still exit at both the Airport Boulevard and Green Valley Road exits.

The new restrictions on Highway 17 will make mass transit only that much more vital, said Santa Cruz County Transportation Commission Executive Director Linda Wilshusen. Special buses leave the Scotts Valley park-and-ride lot at

the former Santa's Village 18 times daily beginning at 5 a.m. enroute to the downtown San Jose Caltrain Depot. From there, passengers have access up the peninsula to San Francisco. There are 16 return trips to Scotts Valley from downtown San Jose between 7:05 a.m. and 6:40 p.m. Fare is \$2 one-way.

Seven other buses traverse Highway 17 between Scotts Valley and a park-and-ride lot at Camden Avenue and Branham Lane in San Jose between 4:20 and 5:45 a.m., and from 5:05 to 6:35 p.m. From that park-and-ride lot, connections are available to Santa Clara County Transit routes, including express service to Moffet and Great America industrial parks, and NASA Ames and Stanford research parks.

"Hopefully, the new restrictions will be the added incentive to encourage drivers to take alternative modes of transit," Wilshusen said.

Besides buses, special Caltrain service, originating in Salinas with a stop at Watsonville's station on Salinas Road, continues Monday. It leaves Watsonville Junction at 6 a.m. weekdays, arriving at IBM in south San Jose at 7 a.m. and downtown San Jose at 7:15 a.m. Return trips leave downtown San Jose at 4:50 p.m., returning to Watsonville at 5:55 p.m. Fare is \$3 from Watsonville one-way or \$4.50 round trip.

The passenger-rail service from Watsonville is a first since 1959, when the former Sun Tan Special went out of business. Ridership has slowly increased from Salinas, Watsonville and Gilroy, going from four, 44, 70, 89 and 104 the past week.

For information, about bus routes over the hill, call 425-8600. For Caltrain information, call 1-800-558-8661. The Santa Cruz County Rideshare Program, which matches car poolers up, call 429-POOL.