

# End of the Roadwork

Work to add new merge lanes to highways 1, 17 finishes six months early



The \$50 million highway project was about improving safety, not increasing capacity, officials say.

Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

By SHANNA MCCORD

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SANTA CRUZ — Navigating the Fishhook and squeezing onto Highway 17 became a little less hectic for drivers coming from Aptos or Capitola with the early completion of new lanes designed to ease merging on and off the county's busiest, and most dangerous, stretch of highway.

The \$50 million, two-and-a-half-year project to widen a three-mile section of highways 1 and 17 between Pasatiempo and the La Fonda overcrossing wrapped up about six months ahead of schedule as the final lane stripes were painted and construction equipment was moved off the highway this week.

The project's early completion is due largely to good weather with little rain and efficient engineering, Caltrans officials said.

The Highway 1/17 Merge Lanes Project widened the county's two major thoroughfares from

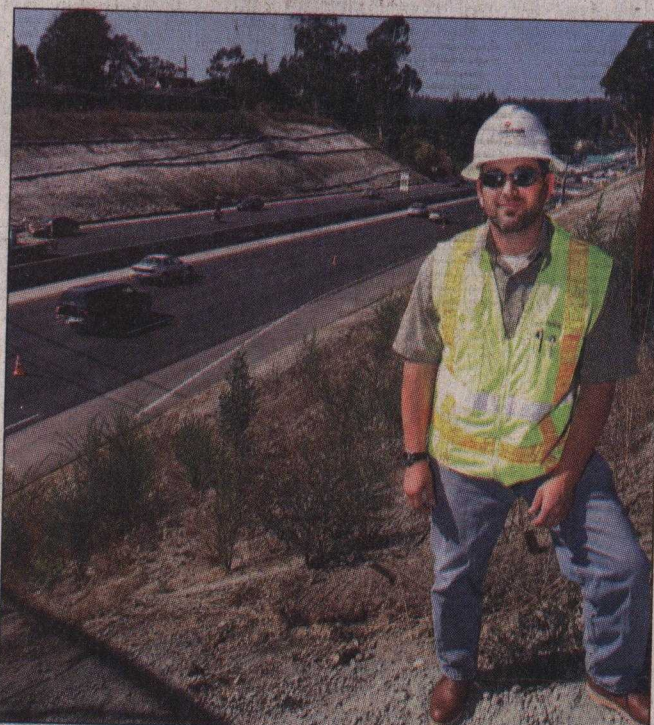
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Highway project a blessing and a curse.  
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## On the Net

Aerial view video of the completed highway project.  
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Graniterock's Karl Philipovitch is the merge lanes project manager.

## Project details

The Highway 1-17 Merge Lanes Project widened the county's two major thoroughfares from four lanes to six from the Pasatiempo overcrossing on Highway 17 to Morrissey Boulevard on Highway 1.

The three mile project used:

■ 42,000 tons of open-grade asphalt.

■ 10,000 cubic yards of concrete.

■ 106,000 tons of base.

■ \$50 million.



# Merge

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four lanes to six from the Pasatiempo overcrossing on Highway 17 to Morrissey Boulevard on Highway 1, and included a new, wider bridge for the Branciforte Avenue overcrossing among other improvements such as sound walls and storm water drains.

"We've waited more than 20 years to finally have safety improvements for not only our community but anyone going through the interchange," said longtime Santa Cruz resident Lynn Robinson, a member of the City Council. "I'm just really pleased with the way it turned out because it was badly needed."

The high-profile widening work — which organizers say was done in the name of safety, not congestion relief — kept drivers on their toes for the past couple of years as Highway 1 went through at least 13 changes in the flow of traffic, often causing backups and slowing the time it took to get in and out of Santa Cruz.

There were times when all traffic was pushed to the middle of the road to allow construction crews to cut dirt out of the slopes on either side of the highway, creating room to build the new lanes and shoulders.

At other times, north and southbound traffic was forced down one side of Highway 1 while crews worked in the middle to widen bridges, construct a new median and repave the road.

"It was like building a freeway in people's front yards," said Project Manager Karl Philipovitch of Granite Rock Inc., the project's general contractor. "We were widening a very congested highway on a postage-size lot. Just the sheer magnitude of work in such a small, confined area made it difficult."

Despite the daunting task, construction crews were able to keep lanes open and cars moving during the day for the project's duration.

One of the mandates from Caltrans,

## If You Go

**WHAT:** Highway 1/17 merge lanes project ribbon-cutting ceremony.

**WHEN:** 1 p.m. Nov. 7

**WHERE:** Branciforte Avenue bridge.

**INFORMATION:** Call 423-0396.

the state agency overseeing the project, was that any lane closures or significant work affecting traffic flow take place at night, between 8 p.m. and 5 a.m.

"We had to keep cars rolling at all times during the day," Philipovitch said.

## What's new

For commuters and visitors from over the hill heading south on Highway 1, the first noticeable change is the dedicated merge lane coming off Highway 17 and onto southbound 1.

After the merge, drivers have their own lane for nearly two miles to the La Fonda Avenue overcrossing, rather than immediately having to jockey for position with cars entering southbound Highway 1 from Ocean Street and downtown Santa Cruz.

There are now two lanes coming out of Ocean Street and downtown instead of one.

"In the old days, that was the pinch point," Philipovitch said. "That's where all the problems occurred."

Traveling north on Highway 1, a new lane begins near Morrissey Boulevard and continues to the Highway 17 offramp. There also is a new offramp for Emeline Avenue.

Nothing has changed going into the Fishhook, but there are now two lanes for northbound 17 drivers, and a dedicated merge lane all the way to Pasatiempo.

There are three lanes from Morrissey to the Fishhook instead of two.

In all, the highway from Pasatiempo to the La Fonda overcrossing has been expanded about 45 feet, which includes wider shoulders on both sides for vehi-



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Even as traffic flows with added lanes, traces of construction striping can still be seen throughout the nearly completed highway merge project at the Fishhook.

cle emergencies, Philipovitch said.

## Long, rough road

The idea of fixing the Fishhook area first surfaced in 1987.

Local transportation officials and elected leaders realized something needed to be done to improve a crowded, dangerous section of the county's most traveled corridor.

They had neither the money nor community support for a three-level flyover proposed by Caltrans in 1990. Residents said the flyover was "too urban" for their beach community.

After several trips back to the drawing board, Caltrans came up with a plan residents said they could live with — the cheaper, more modest merge lanes.

The merge lanes received roughly \$40 million from the California Transportation Commission in 2005, the bulk of the funding that allowed the project to move forward.

Construction started in May 2006.

"This was a need in the county that needed to be addressed," George Dondero, executive director of the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission. "This is a critical spot for the movement of visitors, commuters and business services."

Critics of the merge lanes project say it didn't do much to speed up traffic flow. And opponents contend that any project geared toward single drivers on the highway does nothing to cut down on carbon emissions; they say a wider highway invites more people to use it, and therefore worsens global warming.

In the case of the Highways 1/17 merge lanes project, the bottleneck that

hampered traffic at the Fishhook got pushed down the road.

Peter Koht drives the highways daily from his home in Live Oak to his public relations job in Scotts Valley.

He said he's shaved only two minutes off the morning commute since the improvements were made. After work, he said he hangs around the office or goes for a run before jumping onto the highway to avoid bumper-to-bumper traffic still piling up at the Fishhook.

"My commute's improved from 20 minutes to 18, maybe," Koht said. "Adding lanes to a clogged arterial is akin to a fat man buying a bigger belt."

Project supporters say the merge lanes goal was never to improve congestion.

"You have to remember the purpose of this project was to reduce accidents and improve the merges," Dondero said. "It doesn't solve congestion."

The California Highway Patrol says the interchange improvements are welcome.

"It's definitely improved the flow of traffic, no doubt about that," CHP officer Grant Boles said. "Before, we used to see a lot of congestion and rear-end collisions at heavy commute times."

"When people get used to the change, it will be even better."

## More changes afoot

Transportation leaders say they aren't ignoring the congestion problem on Highway 1, nor are they going to stop improvements at the merge lanes.

Unless additional capacity is added to the highway from Morrissey to Park Avenue, and to San Andreas/Larkin

Valley Road by 2030, there will be heavy traffic jams, according to the Regional Transportation Commission.

They predict the average speed of southbound traffic on that stretch of road during the peak hour in the afternoon will drop from the current 25 mph to about 12 mph in 2030.

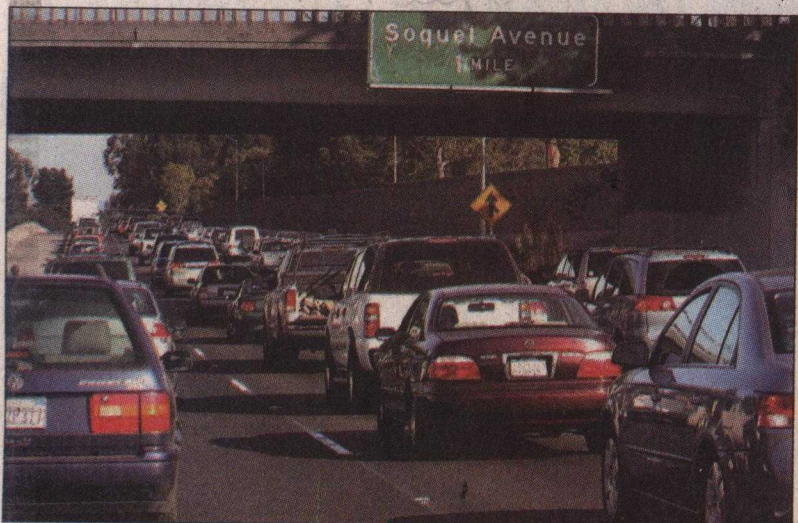
There have been two failed attempts to pass a tax to widen the highway in recent years. There is no third proposal on the horizon, but there is a plan to build high-occupancy vehicle lanes from Morrissey to Larkin Valley Road.

The proposed plan is to build HOV lanes from Morrissey to Larkin Valley that would cater to public buses and carpoolers. The project has been estimated to cost \$400 million, and transportation leaders are stuck on how to pay for it.

"The Regional Transportation Commission has worked tirelessly to bring groups with various perspectives to the table to find common ground on our community's transportation future," the commission's spokeswoman Karena Pushnik said. "If there is no agreement, there will be no funding to fix the existing transportation network, let alone make improvements for the future."

In the meantime, work is moving ahead on building auxiliary lanes that connect the onramps and offramps of Morrissey Boulevard and the Soquel Avenue/Drive exits. The \$22 million lanes, similar to the ones between 41st Avenue and Bay Avenue in Capitola, are slated to begin in 2010 and take two years to complete.

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Traffic backs up on southbound Highway 1 despite the addition of a third lane.