

Highway 1 options narrowed

Highways
County transportation panel to discuss car-pool, toll lanes

By **KAREN A. DAVIS**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ — It'll be a HOT discussion at today's county Regional Transportation Commission meeting.

Commissioners will get their first glimpse today at a feasibility study of building so-called "high occupancy toll" lanes between Santa Cruz and Aptos. The lanes allow motorists to skirt traffic by paying a fee and entering a special toll

lane. Car-poolers and buses would have access to the lanes, too.

The commission provided an overview of its findings in advance of today's session.

After years of debate about how to deal with growing traffic congestion on Highway 1 — up to 110,000 cars travel the highway each day — the commission in 1999 agreed to the HOT lane study.

According to the report, only two of 56

possible HOT lane configurations are feasible. They are:

■ Striped lanes with an entrance near Aptos and intermediate access between Soquel and 41st avenues.

■ Striped lanes with continuous access.

Both options have low capital costs, would net some annual income and serve a broader range of potential users, according to the study conducted by San

Francisco-based Wilbur Smith Associates.

However, allowing intermediate access makes enforcing tolls and car pools difficult, according to previous reports by project planner Luba Wyznyckyj. Also, there might be insufficient room for cars to merge.

The study addresses how well HOT lanes would work on Highway 1, possi-

Please see **HOT LANES** on **Page A7**

HOT topic

5202
The Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission will consider proposals for 'high-occupancy toll' lanes on Highway 1 in an effort to alleviate congestion from Aptos to the Highway 17 interchange. The HOT lane concept allows solo drivers to pay to use car-pool lanes.

Today's meeting is at 9:30 a.m. at the Capitola City Hall, 420 Capitola Ave.

Thursday, May 2, 2002 SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL A-7

HOT lanes

Continued from Page A1

ble access points and what improvements would need to be made to the highway to accommodate the project.

The study's recently completed first phase also evaluated the potential cost — and possible revenue — of making car-pool lanes available to toll-paying, single-occupant vehicles. Solo drivers make up 82 percent of the vehicles on the road.

Commissioners must decide whether to accept the two alternatives as the only options considered for future use on the highway and whether to request that Caltrans include a HOT lane alternative in its Highway 1 widening project report, officials say.

Also under consideration by Caltrans is widening the highway with car-pool lanes or simply adding general-use lanes.

Commissioners also must decide to either proceed with the study's next phase, which would include a financial analysis, or stop the study in its tracks and move to a final report.

The panel's biggest critic of HOT lanes has been Commissioner Mardi Wormhoudt. Wormhoudt, also a county supervisor, has called HOT lanes elitist.

In Southern California, tolls range from 50 cents to \$4.25, depending on time of day and traffic congestion, but

can go as high as \$8. Toll-lane use and income levels are linked, according to a recent San Diego State University study. Forty percent of toll-lane users had a household income of \$120,000 or more, and 36 percent earned \$80,000 to \$119,000 a year, the study found.

Linda Wilshusen, executive director of the transportation commission, has said she likes the idea of user fees attached to car travel. Wilshusen — long an advocate of local commuter rail — has said any highway improvements must be part of a county transportation plan that includes bus service, bicycle routes and other alternative transportation.

Also at today's meeting, commissioners will hear a presentation from some law firms and Granite Construction on a way to possibly speed the Highway 1 project and cut costs. Commissioners also will decide whether to proceed with a 2002 ballot measure to fund the widening project, which has been estimated at \$150 million to \$200 million.

The county Regional Transportation Commission will hold a public hearing on the HOT lane options at 9:30 a.m. today at Capitola City Hall, 420 Capitola Ave., following the 2002 Transportation Excellence Awards ceremony, which begins at 8 a.m.

Contact Karen A. Davis at kdavis@santa-cruz.com.