

# Road work ahead

Local drivers can expect stops along their way

Highways

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By KAREN CLARK  
Sentinel staff writer

**C**AN YOU SAY "nightmare?"

Well, you'll be saying it a lot over the next year as Caltrans begins major reconstruction projects on Highway 1. On Highway 17. And on Highway 9.

All at the same time.

"I think everyone's aware of the frustration of being delayed," said Val Houdyshell, public information officer for Caltrans. "I would hope we would all be on good behavior."

There is a method to this multi-project madness.

Steve Price, district project coordinator for Caltrans, pointed out that the alternative would be to tackle each yearlong project one after the other, leaving drivers to dodge orange traffic cones until the turn of the century.

"Having all of these projects in construction at the same time is both a bother and a blessing," said Price. "There is no question this construction schedule is perhaps the busiest in the county's history."

## Worth the frustration

Linda Wilshusen, executive director of the Santa Cruz County Transportation Commission, said the final product will be worth the daily frustration exacted from drivers.

"You have to do work to main-

tain the roads or your highways will fall apart, and our highways are falling apart," said Wilshusen. "Is it unfortunate that it's all happening at once? Well, yes. ... Are we going to argue against doing the maintenance we've been asking for for years? No way."

All told, the state is pumping nearly \$29 million into 10 projects. Work already has begun on some of the smaller projects, and the major ones could begin as early as next month.

In addition to road-resurfacing projects on the three highways, Caltrans also is planning bridge retrofits throughout the county, as well as storm repair and drainage improvements.

## Aim is smooth driving

Once the resurfacing projects are done, motorists may not be bothered by highway crews bearing shovels filled with asphalt for years to come. Caltrans officials said the reconstructed road surfaces will offer smooth driving for at least 10 years before potholes begin claiming new victims.

The fact that the three major projects, along with the handful of others that focus mainly on bridge retrofits, are hitting all at once simply is a quirk of fate.

Planning by state engineers and a long waiting list for funding priority means these projects are on the drawing board for years before ground is broken.

Even so, said Houdyshell, it's unusual for one county to have



Caltrans worked along Highway 1 near Waddell Creek last week to remove accumulated debris from the base of large cliffs next to the roadway.



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos

Rick Martines of CalTrans controls traffic as Highway 1 is narrowed to one lane near the San Mateo County line recently.

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so many major Caltrans projects going on at one time.

"Maybe for another area, it would not have had the impact, but Santa Cruz County is rela-

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## Is it an inconvenience, or a loss of freedom?

By KAREN CLARK  
Sentinel staff writer

**F**ACING construction delays on one highway is enough to try anyone's patience.

Facing them on three highways at one time could cause a saint to mutter a few expletives.

"Whoa, we're going to be at the mercy of Caltrans," said Mike Herriges, a plumbing contractor from Felton who works over the hill. "It sounds like, logistically, they're going to create a nightmare. There's no way in or out

without running into construction."

Herriges, however, was philosophical about the wave of Caltrans projects set to break over Santa Cruz County next month.

"If their number's up, they're up," he said.

A daily commuter over Highway 17, Herriges knows the side roads well enough to use them to avoid a major jam. But the detours — Bear Creek Road, or Old

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# Road work

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tively small," she said. "You don't have a lot of options to take alternative routes to avoid these construction projects."

Officer Juan Cervantes of the California Highway Patrol said the lack of alternative routes is the biggest obstacle facing drivers who weary of waiting in traffic stalled by construction.

"I went down Soquel Avenue once to avoid traffic, and so did hundreds of other people," said Cervantes. "In all actuality, it's safer to stay on the freeway. It may even not take as long."

Other tips from the CHP include:

- Simply allow more time to get where you're going.
- Expect to be tied up in traffic, and stay calm.
- As tempting as it may be, don't drive on the shoulders of the highway. It's illegal, even if you're just trying to move up to get off at the next off-ramp.
- Pay attention to the construction-zone signs and orange-cone patterns. Don't wait until the last minute to merge out of lanes blocked by workers.
- Slow down through the construction zone; narrowly missing workers and kicking up gravel isn't polite.

Caltrans is in the process of

awarding bids to construction companies to complete the work. One of those in the running is Granite Construction Co., no stranger to highway projects that put workers in the line of vehicle fire.

## Extensive training

Company spokesman Bill Jackson said workers are trained extensively on ways to block off construction areas to protect crews from drivers confused about road-sign directions.

On projects where a flag person must be used — which could be the case on Highway 9 — Jackson said additional training on how to politely answer questions is provided.

Mostly, though, it's up to drivers to remain calm even during lengthy delays.

"Take a deep breath and remember the intent of almost all these road projects is to make (drivers') lives better," said Jackson. "Contractors don't go out and fix roads that don't need it. And we don't fix them on our own volition."

Warning flags about the magnitude of traffic problems were raised as soon as it became clear how many projects were to be undertaken at one time.

Members of the regional Transportation Commission asked

Caltrans to prepare a public-relations program, post advance warning and informational signs, and consider the cumulative impact of delays.

Caltrans' concessions to harried drivers include:

- The miles of reconstruction work will be done in small bites, probably no more than half-mile segments.
- Crews will do as much of the work as possible at night. Safety concerns and the need for warmer temperatures during some parts of the resurfacing process preclude only-at-night projects.
- Work will not be done during peak commute hours, or on Friday afternoons.
- A 24-hour hot line only for Santa Cruz County drivers has been established to give daily updates on where crews will be working. That number is 1-800-523-7623.

The hot-line recording includes a telephone number for people to call if they have complaints or suggestions about the projects.

Caltrans also has a web site on the Internet with fresh daily information. That address is <http://www.dot.ca.gov/dist05/>.

"I hope motorists understand how hard it is to repair roads and keep traffic moving, too," said Houdyshell. "It's going to be difficult for everyone involved."

# Drivers respond

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San Jose Road — will just dump him too far from where he wants to be.

"I'm probably just going to have to live with it and sit through it like everyone else," Herriges said. "I'll just turn the radio up and make some (cell) phone calls."

Caltrans and other transportation officials are asking motorists to keep the long-term health of the county's road system in mind while sitting in those interminable traffic jams.

But not everyone is taking the news kindly.

"Doing all three at once, they're going to take our freedom of travel away," said Brian Price of Santa Cruz, who crisscrosses the county and its freeways for his mobile mechanic and tool delivery business.

On the other hand ... "I'm pleased that they're finally getting around to doing the work," he said. "To repave means no more potholes. They just better do it right."

For some, delays on the road could mean the difference between life or death, or between a solvent company and one on the verge of disaster.

## Emergency worries

That's what faces the county's only ambulance company, and one of its delivery companies.

"We certainly are concerned when all these things go on at the same time," said Dan Quinto, operations manager for American Medical Response West.

Quinto said the company will stay in close contact with Caltrans to ensure its paramedic drivers known where the crews are working each day.

In addition to simply trying to

avoid the freeways, paramedics also know that nearly every construction project routinely creates an access path for emergency vehicles.

Quinto said victims should not be overly concerned about response time, even with the construction projects. Crews in this area, he said, are used to jam-packed roads.

"On any given holiday weekend, or any nice weekend, sometimes getting from Dominican Hospital to downtown Santa Cruz becomes somewhat of a challenge," said Quinto. "We're kind of used to work-arounds."

## Just don't panic

One tip he did offer drivers stuck in construction-delayed traffic who see an emergency vehicle coming from behind: don't panic, and move to the right.

If drivers don't know what to do, said Quinto, it's best they just remain where they are and allow the ambulance to maneuver around them. "It's better to have a stationary obstacle than a moving one."

Chuck Gill, operations manager for Mid Counties Delivery Service, said he fears the projects could impact his business just like the Loma Prieta earthquake did seven years ago.

"It really handicaps us," said Gill, who offers two-hour delivery between Santa Cruz County and the Bay Area for a premium price. With the planned construction projects, that guarantee will change to four hours, which demands a lower fee.

Gill said the company makes an average of 80 trips a day to the Bay Area, so lower fees translate to a lot of lost revenue.

## 'Bad scene for anybody'

"The only thing we can do is

deal with it when it happens," said Gill. "But it will cut into the pocketbook."

Truck company owner Ray Dunlany of Soquel said he'll simply tell his drivers to be patient with the delays.

"It's a bad scene for anybody, but it's something that has to be done," said Dunlany. "It doesn't help to get mad."

But slower deliveries caused by the delays not only hurt truckers, but also consumers, who will be forced to pay higher prices in the long run, said Dunlany.

Although some drivers may be tempted to jump off the freeways for alternative routes, Dunlany suggested thinking that one through.

"The whole transportation system here is in such an uproar ... so if they plug up Highway 1, the alternative routes are immediately plugged up, too," said Dunlany. "Sometimes you're better off just staying where you are, and then grin and bear it."

At least one person applauded Caltrans' decision to do all the projects at once.

## Better now than later

"More power to them," said Kelly Martin, a San Lorenzo Valley resident who recently moved to Pescadero but still visits the Santa Cruz area every week to deliver flowers.

"If they think they could do it (all at once), then do it. Get it over with. Don't drag it out," he said.

Martin recalled living in Oklahoma, and how freeway projects there were dragged out over 20 years.

"It'll screw up the commute for now, but it'll be now or later," he said.

Sentinel staff writer May Wong contributed to this report.