

Best traffic alternative? Stop driving alone

Second of two parts.
By KEITH MURAOKA
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — Building new roads or widening existing ones will not solve worsening traffic problems. That was the sermon preached last week by speaker after speaker at the first-ever Consider the Alternatives traffic management conference.

Instead, they said, a variety of traffic management alternatives need to be considered.

While numerous alternatives were discussed at Friday's all-day conference, one took center stage. That involved modifying human behavior, convincing motorists to break the habit of commuting alone.

But that's easier said than done.

Quoting a recent Los Angeles Times poll, speaker Kate Riley, a senior consultant for the State Assembly, said that a whopping 84 percent still drive to work alone. What's more, the vast majority said they would rather put up with bumper-to-bumper traffic than give up the privacy and convenience of driving alone.

Most Santa Cruz County motorists apparently feel the same way. Recent vehicle-occupancy surveys on highways 1 and 17 have shown the vast majority commute alone.

Speaker Colleen McCarthy, community impact programs manager for Hewlett-Packard in Santa Clara County, noted, "Californians are

simply used to traffic. It's just something we have to put up with if we want to live here. Driving alone is like a rite of passage."

Eunice Valentine, executive director for RIDES for Bay Area Commuters — which provides ride-sharing services to the 10-county San Francisco Bay Area — agreed. "Congestion has become a way of life. It's a very sad statement, but also a very true one."

Valentine cited the "three C's" of traffic management: convenience, costs and consistency.

To get people out of their cars, for example, public transit must become convenient, inexpensive and consistent in terms of reliability, she said.

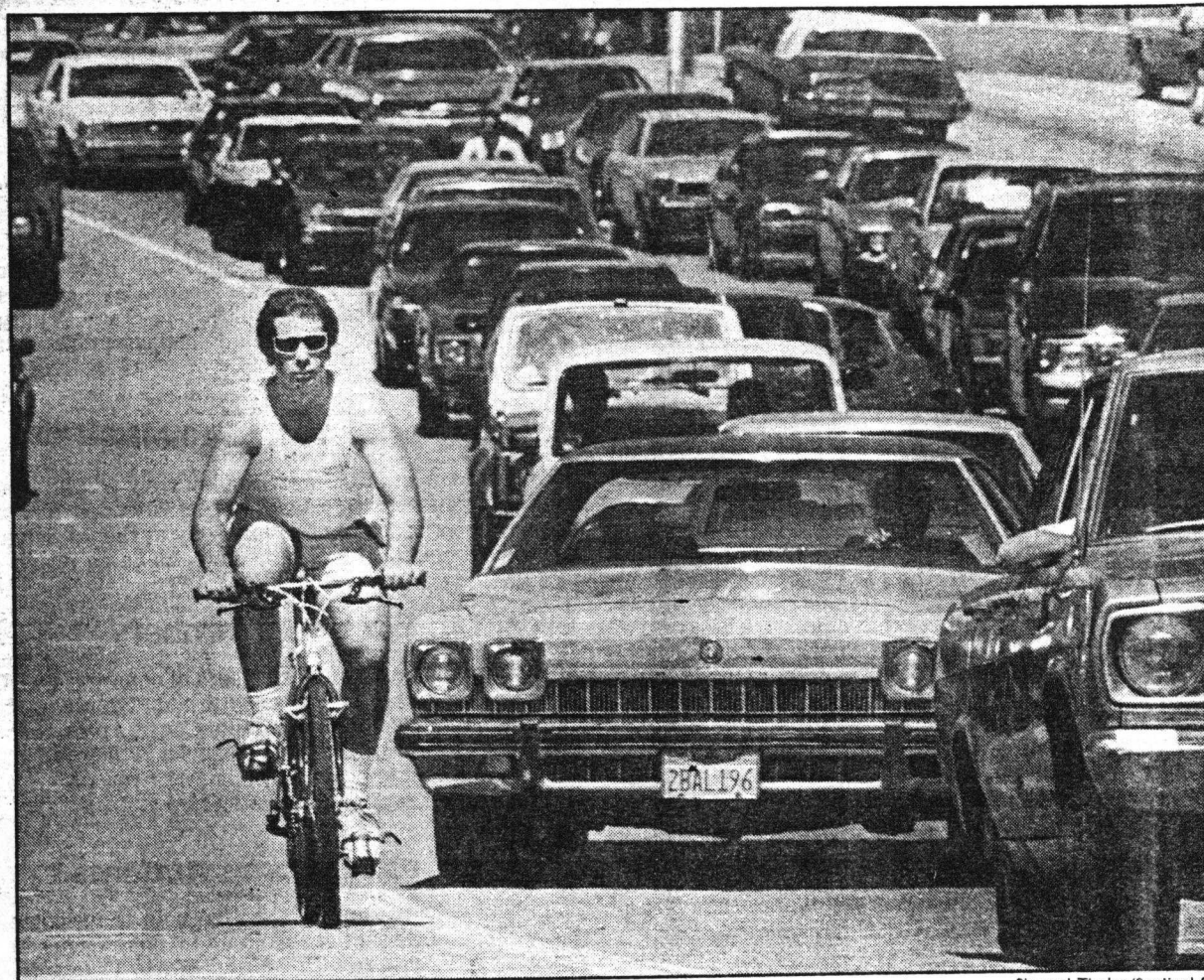
Santa Cruz County Supervisors Chairman Gary Patton said 23 percent of the county's work force is probably participating in their rites of passage by commuting alone out of the county, mostly to Silicon Valley.

Patton cited the need for "fundamental and basic changes in how we live," adding, "It's time to lift our heads out of the sand."

Valentine agreed that an "attitude change" on the part of commuters is needed.

"Who would have thought 20 years ago that we'd have ordinances against smoking?" Valentine asked. "There has to be a major shift in how we use automobiles."

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Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel file

There are quicker ways to get where you're going than staying in your car and in traffic jam.

Traffic/ No easy solutions

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But Aptos Supervisor Robley Levy said, "We don't have to solve the problem in one fell swoop." She cited the need to look at different traffic management strategies. According to Gary Edson, director of the Golden Triangle Commuter Network — encompassing highways 101 and 237, as well as Interstate 880 in Santa Clara County — employers remain a key to traffic management.

"There are 800,000 commuters in Santa Clara County," Edson said. "Employers have the ability to provide incentives to their employees (in order) to rideshare." Those incentives could take the form of extra pay or free bus passes.

But management support is also needed, added Hewlett-Packard's McCarthy. "We need bosses to say, 'Oh yes, you have to catch your vanpool, we'll cut this meeting

short,' instead of saying, 'You're leaving?'"

Lawrence Odle, executive officer for the Monterey Bay Area Unified Air Pollution Control District, quoted Will Rogers' proposed method to solve traffic. "Just put all the cars off the road that aren't paid for," Odle quipped.

Elizabeth Deakin, associate professor of city and regional planning at the University of California, called for reducing the high costs associated with traffic congestion through "sensible ways palatable to citizens."

Deakin suggested that motorists use an alternate way to get to and from work just once a week.

Santa Cruz County Transportation Commissioner and Santa Cruz City Councilman John Laird quoted his favorite statistic, saying, "It has been estimated that the difference between traffic at 55 miles per hour and slow-moving,

bumper-to-bumper traffic, is five extra cars per hundred. If each of us can figure out a way to get out of our car five days out of 100, we wouldn't have a traffic problem."

County Transportation Commission Executive Director Linda Wilshusen conceded afterward that people's jobs sometimes make it impossible to carpool or take public transportation. However, she feels it's possible that at least 50 percent of the work force could easily use some alternate form of transportation once a week.

"Breaking the driving-alone habit can be like recycling," Wilshusen said. "It's taken us time, but now we have curbside recycling in many jurisdictions. It takes a little effort, but we're managing."

"We need to look at traffic the same way," she added. "Everybody needs to do it. It'll take a little more time, a little more effort, but the benefits are enormous."