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Soquel Ave. Bridge awash in red tape

By ADRIANA REYNERI
STAFF WRITER

It looks as though the city of Santa Cruz has the empty satisfaction of saying "I told you so" to state workers trying to repair the Soquel Avenue Bridge.

But being right won't help city officials get the bridge repaired on schedule, because the project, governed by federal law and funded by federal money, is out of their control.

City Manager Richard Wilson, in a phone interview, observed, "Just to watch the red tape have the effect it's having at the local level is extremely frustrating."

The state Department of Transportation, using disaster funds provided by the Federal Highway Administration, has undertaken the task of restoring the bridge. Sections of two of the bridges four lanes collapsed in 1982 under stress from the rampaging waters of the San Lorenzo River.

"In these kinds of disaster-reimbursement projects, the state and federal government stick as closely as possible to the original design," Wilson said.

Federal guidelines prohibit improving the bridge, only allowing repairs of disaster-caused damage.

City engineers said common sense dictated replacement of the 60-year-old cement pilings supporting the collapsed bridge section. These would match the new, better-designed pilings supporting the two lanes that held during high water.

The city of Santa Cruz installed those pilings in the 1960s when it widened the bridge to four lanes, Director of Public Works Larry Erwin said.

"They said, 'No, we can only replace the little span that fell in. That's all we can do.' They said that would be a 'betterment.' They kept using that word, 'betterment,'" Erwin said. My argument was it's not really a betterment. You're

going to build something that lasts a while."

Despite this advice, federal and state officials adhered to the law and approved a project that assumed that 1920 pilings were sound. The repairs, begun last spring, were scheduled to be finished by December.

Two weeks ago, after several unsuccessful attempts to divert the river and dry the bed, contractors for Caltrans discovered the old, deteriorating pilings were unsafe.

Caltrans engineers are now back at the drawing board, devising a way to shore up the old piers. Unfortunately, the engineers are working under a deadline set by another state agency.

The state Department of Fish and Game, charged with protecting the fisheries in the San Lorenzo River, does not allow deep-water construction to take place in the river between Oct. 15 and April 15.

The city has secured a 30-day extension on the deadline, but city engineers say it will be impossible to finish reinforcing the old pilings by Nov. 15, Wilson said.

"It means inconvenience," he said. "It means they're have to get in and start again next spring."

Councilman John Laird said the whole process has been extremely frustrating.

"I'm pretty angry about it. We approached the state and told them the piers were not of good enough quality to build around," Laird said. "Now that's the case and it's going to delay the construction of the bridge. I'm just outraged."

But city engineers advised replacement of the more than 60-year-old cement piling supporting the section of bridge that collapsed, to match the better-designed pilings supporting the two lanes that held during high water. The city of Santa Cruz installed those pilings in the 1960s when it widened the bridge to four lanes, said Larry Erwin, director of public works for the city.