



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

The Fishhook improvement project has hit another roadblock.

Residents' wishes double price of Fishhook project

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Highways
✓ **SANTA CRUZ** — The new \$63 million price tag for revamping the Fishhook has once again put the future of the project in question as officials try to move beyond sticker shock.

Members of the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission wrestled Thursday with what should be their next step.

It was more than a small setback last week when they learned Caltrans' new cost estimate for the first stage of improving the notorious interchange of Highways 1 and 17 had more than doubled from the original \$30.8 million figure.

The costs escalated primarily because Caltrans reworked its design to please residents concerned with

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— *Ken Nelson,*
commission member

the magnitude and aesthetics of the project.

But, at \$63 million, commissioners noted that the project may well be out of reach.

The commission asked Caltrans to come back with a detailed cost

1-9-98
breakdown of the project. With a menu of sorts, they then can try to pick and choose, electing to have some features done while rejecting others.

For instance, the cost of the project could be reduced by deleting the Emeline Street off-ramp and by not adding a lane to the southbound Highway 17-Ocean Street off-ramp which has been proposed to be a single lane.

If the commission should elect to go ahead with the \$63 million endeavor, it would have to find money for it.

If the project is nixed, however, the money possibly could be redirected to other projects. But because of the bureaucracy of obtaining funding, it could be a while before the county actually gets

Please see FISHHOOK — BACK PAGE

A-10 — Friday, Jan. 9, 1998 — Sentinel

Fishhook

Continued from Page A1
that money to spend on other things.

Commissioners said they will postpone their decision on how to proceed until April.

"It seems kind of incredible," said Commissioner Jan Beautz. "It's hard to understand how something could go up this much."

Steve DiGrazia of Caltrans explained that the main reason for the huge jump in price is that significant additional construction needs to be done to create a more visually palatable interchange.

"It boils down to lowering the height of the flyover structure (the elevated connector of southbound Highway 17-southbound Highway 1) and lowering the visual impact. ... That one feature there has created a chain reaction of events."

The Fishhook is to be demolished and rebuilt in the name of safety.

It was found to have an accident rate five times that of the state average. Plans to make the interchange safer began in 1985, when the local transportation commission asked Caltrans to study the junction. It has since met with numerous obstacles and delays.

Caltrans has not had an easy time winning favor from the community. Critics objected to the proposed Fishhook redesign saying the concrete structure not only did not fit with the image of Santa Cruz County, but does nothing to alleviate congestion. Residents close to the interchange were concerned about increased noise, the height of sound walls and removal of trees.

As a result, Caltrans went back to the drawing board. Engineers came back with a 25-foot-high connector to replace the 40-foot concrete structure originally proposed. The state also redesigned the interchange so that southbound Highway 17 traffic would merge with southbound Highway 1 traffic from the left instead of the right — thereby moving it away from neighborhoods.

The design changes, however, meant that certain aspects of the construction that had been planned for later must be done sooner, DiGrazia said.

"This project does have a life of its own," said Ken Nelson a member of the local commission. "I am not convinced this is the best solution to the problem. ... We have

run so fast and far we have lost sight of where we are going."

News about the new price tag had opponents of the project again urging the commission to do away with the plan.

"If the Fishhook ain't broke, don't fix it," said Santa Cruz resident Gerald Bartlett. The money should instead be spent on light rail and other alternative forms of transportation, he said.

While the ultimate fate of the project remains undecided, there are some interim measures that Caltrans has agreed to try in response to an appeal by the neighborhood group Coalition for an Improved Fishhook Interchange.

Within the year, the merge point at the Fishhook where northbound Highway 1 merges with southbound Highway 17 will be eliminated. Northbound Highway 1 will be reduced to one lane, leaving Highway 17 with two lanes to itself as it approaches Ocean Street. The idea is that traffic merging from Highway 1 will be confined to the single lane, which should curb the number of accidents. The state also is considering reducing the speed limit to 45 mph in all directions as traffic enters the interchange.