

Local

7 months of repair work starts on Highway 17

By BOB SMITH
STAFF WRITER

Over-the-hill commuters and weekday tourists face a seven-month nightmare of congestion and stop-and-go traffic as Caltrans begins to repave Highway 17 between Scotts Valley and Los Gatos.

Caltrans today began the first portion of the \$1.64 million project that will last until December.

Transportation officials are warning motorists that they should allow an extra 30 minutes to make the Santa Cruz-Los Gatos trip because of the work.

About 60,000 cars and trucks, including 20,000 commuters, use the highway daily, Caltrans said.

Crews are working on small portions of the roadway, grinding

down rough areas of the road, some of which were created when the roadway cracked and buckled during the October 1989 earthquake. Traffic will be restricted to one lane for short distances during the grinding operation.

Beginning in July, repaving begins in earnest on the 13-mile stretch of four-lane road.

Work will take place during the non-commute hours Monday through Friday for each direction of traffic, Caltrans officials told Santa Cruz County transportation planners.

In the northbound lanes, work will take place Monday through Thursday between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m., Friday between 9 a.m. and noon, and on days before designated holidays.

Transportation officials are warning motorists that they should allow an extra 30 minutes to make the Santa Cruz-Los Gatos trip because of the work.

In the southbound direction, crews will work from sunrise to 3 p.m. Monday through Thursday and from sunrise to noon Fridays and the days before holidays.

Crews will not work between Aug. 30 and Sept. 8, the busy Labor Day holiday week during which tens of thousands of tourists traditionally flock to Santa Cruz County.

Caltrans officials say the resurfacing can't be done at night because the type of asphalt — designed to minimize wintertime ice buildup on the roadway — has to be laid down when the air and ground is warm, otherwise it won't adhere to the old road surface.

State officials are seeking a \$30,000 grant to beef up the county's Ride Sharing Program and

provide an ongoing public information program on the highway work.

Santa Cruz County Transportation Commission executive director Linda Wilshusen said the money, if provided by Caltrans, would be used for a variety of things, including daily advisories on where the road closures will be and the alternatives, including ride sharing and the Highway 17 commuter bus service.

No one seems to know now what the financial implications of the roadwork will be for Santa Cruz County's tourism industry.

Wilshusen said she knows of no estimates on the potential losses the county might suffer from the road closures.

When she first heard about the

project, Wilshusen said, "I was very concerned and asked them to postpone it for a year."

Wilshusen said she was worried about the impact it would have on Santa Cruz's tourism, now just beginning to recover from the earthquake and the closure of the Riverside Street bridge over the San Lorenzo River into Beach Flats.

She said Caltrans officials said they had to do the work this summer.

"They are very concerned about the condition of Highway 17 and want to get on it," she said. "It is in really bad shape in some areas."

"I'm concerned, but they are avoiding the weekends and Friday afternoons. Frankly, I don't think there will be that much of a delay — 15 to 30 minutes maximum,"