

# Toll idea for Highway 17 quietly killed

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SANTA CRUZ — The Santa Cruz County Transportation Commission silently put to rest Thursday the idea of turning Highway 17 through the Santa Cruz Mountains into a toll road.

Commissioners without comment approved the consent calendar which included a report about the toll road concept from their Highway 17 Ad Hoc Advisory Committee. The committee unanimously opposed the concept and recommended the commission drop the idea.

The silent treatment which commissioners afforded the item effectively did that, Commission Executive Director Linda Wilshusen said after the meeting.

"Essentially, it doesn't have any support," said Wilshusen. "To a person, the committee thought it was a terrible idea."

Added Commission Chairman Joe Cucchiara, "It settles the discussion for the time being. I should never say 'never' with anything pertaining to transportation, but the idea for a toll road did not have support."

The toll road concept for moun-

tainous Highway 17 was raised by the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, a conglomerate of nine San Francisco Bay Area counties that doesn't include Santa Cruz.

The study found that a 25-cent-per-car toll would generate about \$3 million annually, which could be used to make needed safety improvements on the 15-mile stretch of four-lane highway between Scotts Valley and Los Gatos. By 1990, nearly 60,000

motorists per day will traverse the road.

Under federal law, however, a toll could not be set up on Highway 17 since it is an already established road.

Rather than talking about tolls, Wilshusen said state lawmakers should think in terms of increasing the gas tax to raise money for highway improvements.

However, two state transportation

spokesmen who addressed the commission said it was highly unlikely that legislators would ever raise the gas tax enough to be of major help.

Wilshusen added that she was happy that the study was done. "It's fine that the MTC looked at it," she said. "It provides us with some very good information as to financing options."

Cucchiara, while agreeing the study adds to future alternatives,

hinted that it acted as a smoke screen, of sorts, "diverting attention away from the fact the state cannot back up its responsibility, which is to pay for maintenance of state highways."

Al Huerby, a senior financial analyst with the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, acknowledged that the study was not done as a serious proposal. Instead, it was "purely a financial analysis" to look

at how tolls might help and what kinds of problems they might cause.

In an unrelated Highway 17 safety item, Wilshusen reported that the commission's proposal to take the lead on an emergency call box system will soon be proceeding through area cities for approval.

Such approval would mean adding \$1 to county residents' vehicle-registration fees.