

A Hairy Highway

7-7-88
SW



THOMAS W. CONANT

Terri Morgan

Highway 9 is the kind of road the Germans engineered cars for. The main artery through the San Lorenzo Valley, Highway 9 is a windy, narrow serpentine that parallels the twists of the San Lorenzo River between Highway 1 in Santa Cruz and Saratoga as it snakes through Felton, Ben Lomond, Brookdale and Boulder Creek. It is a tricky road, and, once you get to know it, one that invites speed. The drivers who commute on it regularly have learned each and every turn, where the straight-aways are, where you can accelerate and where you can't. The more familiar one becomes with the road, the more likely they are to respond to the invitation to push the pedal closer to the metal. And the more they respond, the more likely they are to become a statistic.

The experienced Highway 9 driver, even when traveling at slightly higher than the speed limit, is probably safer on the road—until they meet someone who isn't. Unfortunately, these meetings occur with alarming regularity. In 1987, 206 vehicles traveling on Highway 9 smacked into pedestrians, trees, animals, bicycles and each other. According to Captain Steve Ellis of the California Highway Patrol, in 73 percent of the accidents the driver at fault was a Valley resident.

"That most of the violators live up there is fairly obvious if you think about it," said Ellis. "This isn't meant to denigrate Valley residents, but they're the ones that know the road and they develop a nonchalant attitude about it. They start cutting corners and driving over their heads."

"Those are telling statistics," agreed Fifth District Supervisor Joe Cucchiara, whose district includes the San Lorenzo Valley. "Most people view Highway 9 as a way to get in and out of the Valley. But Highway 9 is also a residential neighborhood; there are seniors crossing it, kids at bus stops, bicyclists and pedestrians using Highway 9 on a daily basis. It functions as

a neighborhood street and it has to be treated as such."

This point was brought home on a dark, misty evening last January when Boulder Creek's Florence Koth was struck by a car and killed as she was crossing Highway 9. Koth had just returned home from work and was attempting to reach her mailbox. The driver of the car that hit her was a volunteer firefighter responding to an emergency call. No charges were filed against the firefighter, who said he didn't see Koth until he hit her.

Koth was a popular Valley resident. She left behind a devastated husband and two young children. The tragedy touched many of her neighbors and ignited a massive Highway 9 safety campaign. Supervisor Cucchiara, in response to the more than 700 S.L.V. residents who signed a petition seeking Highway 9 improvements, recommended to the Santa Cruz County Traffic Commission that a safety program be coordinated. "There was unanimous interest for the program," said Cucchiara. "The Valley Women's Club came forward as a local community organization willing to coordinate the program. Caltrans, the CHP, Senator Mello, Assemblyman Farr, the Santa Cruz Metropolitan Transit District and the S.L.V. Lions Club have also gotten involved."

One of the Valley Women's Club's first projects was organizing a "Walk for Safety" campaign, which was held May 14. According to VWC president Nancy Macy, 150 people marched from Ben Lomond to Highlands Park to kick off the campaign. "Highway 9 is our neighborhood road," said Macy. "We have to slow down."

The VWC also held a poster design contest in the local schools and commissioned five artists to construct large signs that will be placed along Highway 9 to remind people to drive safely through the Valley. The VWC has produced bumper stickers and

T-shirts heralding their cause. They have also held brainstorming sessions to identify trouble spots along the road and suggest ways to improve them. "We've got the backing of Caltrans and the CHP," said Macy. "They've both committed to implementing the suggestions we've come up with."

The CHP has beefed up their use of radar on Highway 9. "Some improvements, like trimming back vegetation and parts of the embankment [in problem areas] we can implement immediately," said Ellis. "Other improvements, like left-turn lanes, widening the Felton Bridge, and coordinating the signals at Highway 9 and Mount Hermon Road to help the flow of traffic are being funded. We're also trying to identify spots that need turnouts, and develop public awareness to let people know they have to use the turnouts if they're going slowly. Highway 9 is a state road, subject to federal regulations. There is a double line all the way along it, with nowhere to pass. It's also a well-traveled road. During the summer, which are the peak traffic months, 19,500 cars a day use Highway 9."

Supervisor Cucchiara secured \$1.5 million in state, federal and local funds for left-turn lanes and resignalization of traffic lights in Felton. Another \$2 million will be used for center-lane improvements between Graham Hill and Alba Roads over the next five years. \$1.7 million is slated for widening and resurfacing the road at the north end of Highway 9 and adding more turnouts to this section of the road.

"These are just the physical improvements," said Cucchiara. "Safety goes beyond that. It's an attitude, an awareness, and we're encouraging the community to participate in this safety program. We're reminding people that Highway 9 is a neighborhood street, and they must drive accordingly."