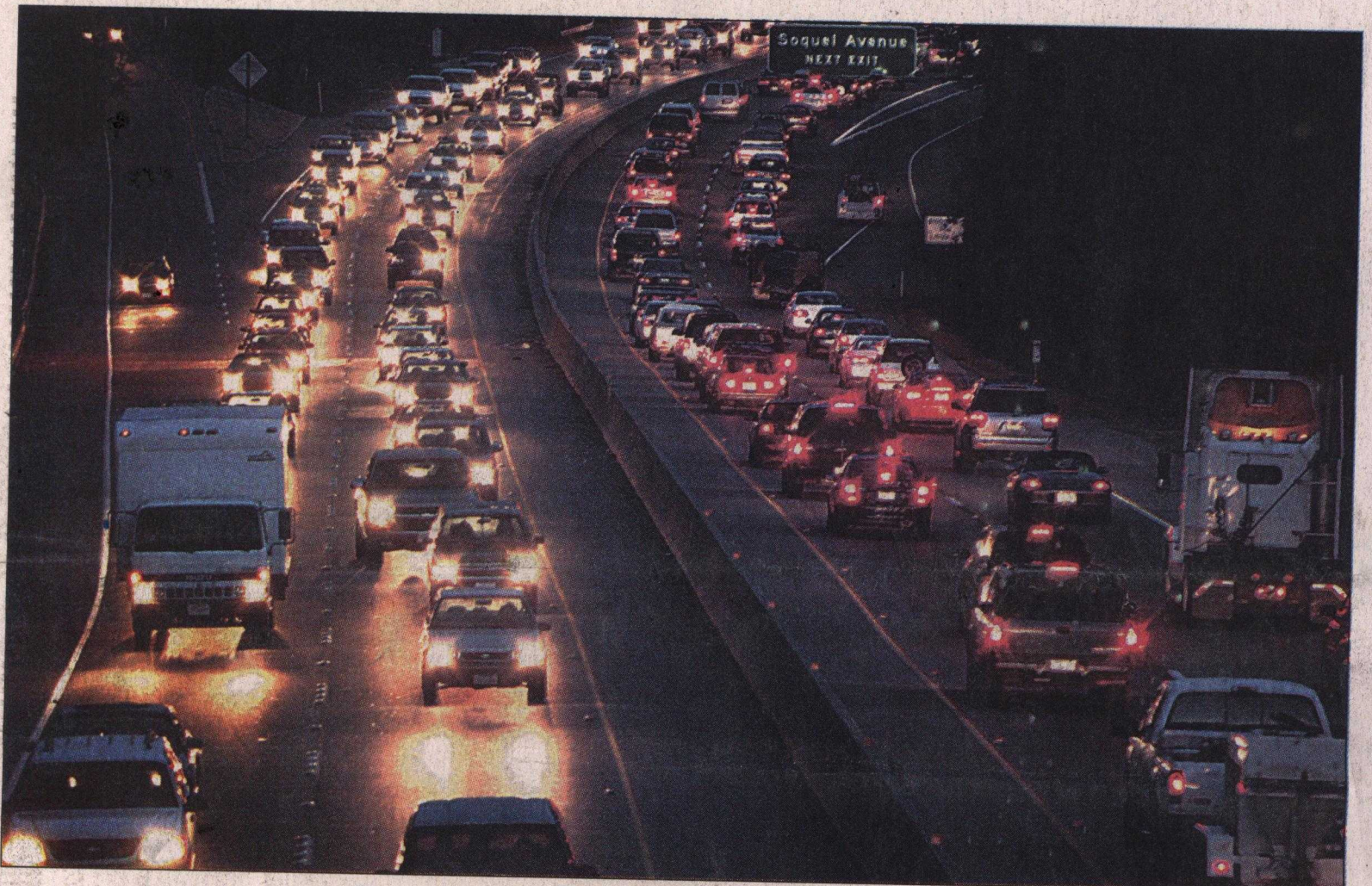


# Highway widening woes



The Highway 1 commute backs up Tuesday evening near the Soquel Avenue offramp.

Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

## Public less supportive of sales-tax measure to fund project

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The widening of Highway 1 "may be doomed from the start" if a survey of public opinion on the issue is reflected in the vote next year.

The survey of 750 people last month shows only 64 percent of the public would vote for the half-cent sales-tax measure in November if it includes highway widening as well as other road projects. That's down from the last time the study was conducted, a year-and-a-half ago, when 70 percent of the public supported it.

When residents were asked if they

would support a sales-tax measure that paid only for highway widening, only 55 percent said yes.

A two-thirds majority is required for a tax measure to pass.

Dennis Norton, a member of the Santa Cruz Regional Transportation Commission, which is considering floating the tax measure, said the survey results, combined with the likelihood that voters will be asked to approve additional sales-tax measures on the same ballot, could kill the tax measure — and the project.

"I hate to say it, but it looks like it may be doomed from the start," he

said. "You don't want to be in the borderline position before campaigns start."

Paul Elerick, a member of the group opposed to the widening, said the survey "shows that we're going to defeat this."

But supporters of the widening aren't thrown off by the survey.

"I'm not discouraged by this," said Jim Conklin, a member of Citizens for Improved Transportation. "(The decrease in support) is typical of what's going on all over California in the last six to eight months. We'll be conducting our own survey in the next 30 to 40 days, and we'll see what

we get. This is a long process, and that survey is just one step along the way."

Linda Wilshusen, Regional Transportation Commission executive director, acknowledged sales-tax measures are harder to pass now.

She said it's clear it will be necessary to include more than the Highway 1 widening in the measure, and offer other road improvements or transportation projects as incentives to pass the measure.

But transportation commissioner Norton worried about that, since it's

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## Highway

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not clear yet how much the widening would cost. To widen the road from the Fishhook in Santa Cruz to State Park Drive in Aptos, the commission estimated it would cost \$300 million. But it has not been determined how much it would cost to extend the widening to Larkin Valley Road in South County.

A 30-year, half-cent sales tax measure would raise \$1.1 billion.

The survey, conducted by Gene Bregman and Associates of San Francisco, asked 150 residents of each supervisorial district their opinion on Highway 1 widening, sales-tax measures and other ways to spend the money. It has a margin of error of 2.1 percent to 3.6 percent.

The survey will come before the commission's expenditure committee in January.

Bregman, in a memo on the report, states that sales-tax measures have become more difficult

to pass in the last year, but still recommends the commission plan to place a tax measure on the ballot in November, and continue to poll the public as the deadline to place the measure nears.

The survey's findings include:

■ When asked how to spend the tax money, voters said they'd prefer to widen Highway 1 first, then spend money on other road projects — but just barely. Only 52 percent supported doing that. Thirty-seven percent wanted to use the money for other projects first, "even if it means the Highway 1 project would take longer to complete."

■ Live Oak and Santa Cruz residents were evenly divided on whether they would widen Highway 1 or complete other projects first.

■ Live Oak residents preferred spending the money on local street safety and improving sidewalks and bike lanes.

■ Aptos residents were less supportive than the county as a whole in increasing bus service.

■ Santa Cruz residents most supported improving local roads.

■ Watsonville residents were the most supportive of bus improvements.

■ San Lorenzo Valley residents were most supportive of spending the money on improving school transportation.

The survey results left Norton cold, and wanting to remove the purchase of the Union Pacific rail line from the list of options.

"We have the money to do that project, and I don't want it to get pulled into the fray," he said. "If we include it, it will never happen."

Santa Cruz Mayor and RTC commissioner Emily Reilly said the survey supports the Santa Cruz City Council's decision last month not to join the joint-powers authority for highway widening until the sales-tax measure passes.

"It's important we don't spend any money on it until it goes through," she said. "I have heard (Gene Bregman) say before that you need a sales-tax measure to poll very well before you go into the campaign."

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