

The Road to San Jose

Highway 17 is the county's best anti-growth measure

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ASK State Sen. Henry Mello (D-Watsonville) what he thinks of Highway 17, and even if he's in the middle of a summer traffic jam he'll answer, "I think they built a good road."

Mello, like many county residents, vows to keep Highway 17 the way it is—curves, hills, traffic jams and all.

"If they want to make changes in Highway 17, they should change it so there's four lanes northbound and none south," Mello said, tongue slightly in cheek. "Let all the people from over the hill with their hot dogs and six-packs figure out for themselves how to get over here."

For at least the last 16 years Highway 17 has served as one of this area's best anti-growth tools: a county-sanctioned bottleneck that officials say keeps Santa Cruz from serving as a suburb of Silicon Valley. But there may be trouble looming.

Since its construction 40 years ago, traffic on Highway 17 has increased five-fold. Last year, during the peak usage months of August and September, an average of 51,000 vehicles used the road each day—11,000 over its designed capacity of 40,000. In fact, the 40,000 mark (the point at which traffic is designed to travel comfortably at the speed limit) has been surpassed every year during peak months since 1972, according to Caltrans figures.

Tourists aren't the only drivers causing traffic jams. The Santa Cruz County Transportation Commission (SCCTC) estimates 15,000 county residents commute daily to the San Jose area.

During the peak time at 7 am, traffic averages more than 3,000 vehicles per hour—only 500 cars short of a complete standstill. If present trends continue, next year's average daily traffic—not just summer weekend traffic—could surpass the 40,000 design capacity mark for the first time.

Although it recognizes the traffic problems, the county is inten-

tionally doing little about it. "The county has had policy of holding the line on 17 in order to control growth," said Ron Marquez, executive director of the SCCTC. "And to a certain extent, it's worked."

The county's present anti-expansion policy was formulated

Ever since, the county has enjoyed slow growth at the expense of an increasingly crowded and dangerous highway.

Presently, complaints from the public about traffic jams and accidents on the highway aren't any more numerous than usual (two to five phone calls per week), but

are increasing at an even faster rate. In May, for instance, the average daily traffic was 58,000 vehicles, a 14 percent increase over the peak months of August and September of the year before. That statistic is especially surprising considering May isn't normally a peak month for traffic.

Whether or not the road becomes impassable soon, Highway 17's future is a gamble. The county is betting that traffic on the main artery into Santa Cruz will regulate itself.

accidents, according to California Highway Patrol officials.

"It's so easy to drift into those things," said CHP Captain Don Anderson of Aptos. The dividers were first constructed on a large scale this spring in Santa Cruz County and officials should know at the end of the year precisely what effect they have on the accident rate.

On other fronts, transportation planners are trying to decrease traffic flow in ways that don't require an expansion of the existing road. For instance, under ideal conditions carpooling could reduce commuter traffic up to 33 percent. Planners concede, however, that the rate of compliance needed to obtain those figures is probably an impossibility in Santa Cruz County.

"No one has ever achieved that [compliance rate] in one corridor," said Marquez. The relatively scattered business locations in Silicon Valley make the opportunities for carpooling even harder, Marquez said.

Staggering commute times is another possibility, but it is not known how much congestion would be saved by such a plan. Another factor adding to Highway 17's congestion is commercial trucking. Experts say half of the highway is taken up when only two percent of the traffic flow is comprised of trucks. Presently, trucks account for a little more than two percent of the flow during daylight hours. The SCCTC has looked into ways of cutting or staggering truck traffic, but Marquez said such programs are impossible to implement without disrupting trucking businesses.

For weekend travel, the Convention and Visitors Bureau is looking into starting a radio station that would report the findings of traffic spotters at the summit and on Water Street. Weekend tourists could tune in the station to find the best way to get into and around town, said Joe Flood, director of the bureau.

Short of expansion or building another freeway, however, it seems nothing will save Highway 17 from becoming a "push comes to shove" situation within the decade.

"This isn't a dead issue," said Supervisor Gary Patton. "Highway 17 is an issue that's always looming in the background." •



in 1971, when Caltrans proposed constructing a six- or eight-lane freeway to replace the present one. The county board of supervisors at that time voted unanimously to ask Caltrans to drop the idea because it felt a bigger freeway would bring too many people to the area.

Later that year supervisors took an extra step, successfully persuading the legislature to completely delete the 19-mile stretch of the highway between Santa Cruz and Los Gatos from the state freeway and expressway system. That effectively killed the possibility of any expansion without Santa Cruz County first demanding it.

"We just backed off after it got taken out of the system," said Ken Berner of Caltrans in San Francisco.

officials concede that the situation will reach a point, eight to 10 years in the future, when residents and politicians will again have to make decisions about the road.

"If the trend continues, in 10 years we're going to have a big, big problem," said Nick Papadakis, transportation manager for the Association of Monterey Bay Agencies and Governments.

Traditionally, traffic on Highway 17 has increased at an annual rate of eight to nine percent. If that rate continues, in six years the average daily traffic rate during peak months will reach 80,000 vehicles, or a point where the highway is bumper to bumper the entire stretch on an average day.

The latest growth figures, however, show that traffic totals

"I think some people will reach a point where they will stay home rather than put up with a traffic jam," said Marquez.

For now, the county is initiating relatively band-aid solutions to the highway's problems that have included the construction of more center dividers, guardrails and warning signs.

Nonetheless, as of 1979, Highway 17 from Santa Cruz to Santa's Village had .87 accidents per million vehicle miles, slightly higher than the state average of .79. From Santa's Village to the summit the number of accidents jumps to 2.01, 254 percent above the state average and the highest rate in the Monterey Bay Area.

Ironically, the advent of the center dividers, while expected to bring the number of fatal accidents down, may have the opposite effect on the number of all