

Caltrans: Highway work to start on time

Highways 1 and 17
Merge-lane project begins despite lack of funding

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SANTA CRUZ — Despite not having the money needed to commit to the work, Caltrans this week started posting signs and clearing trees in preparation for the overhaul of the traffic-snarled intersection of highways 1 and 17.

The moves come despite bids from contractors last week that were more than 20 percent — or about \$7 million — too high for the estimated \$35.6 million project.

The state agency is moving forward

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SUPERVISOR MARDI WORMHOUDT

with the plan to start the roadwork this spring because staff is optimistic the money will come through, said spokeswoman

Susana Cruz.

In the planning since 1985, the three-year project aims to improve safety and traffic flow on the congested, accident-prone junction, which carries thousands of cars per day. The work, which includes merge lanes and sound walls, was approved last year, but transportation leaders are scrambling for funds.

"There's been a statewide problem in bids coming in too high," said David Brewer, chief deputy director of the California

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Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

A construction sign announcing the merge-lane project stands near the interchange of highways 1 and 17.

Highway

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Transportation Commission.

That agency should decide next month if they will provide Santa Cruz County the extra funds needed for the project. The money would come out of Santa Cruz County's state funding for future years.

But another wait wouldn't surprise county transit commissioner and Supervisor Mardi Wormhoudt.

"It has not been my experience with Caltrans that there are just pots of money sitting around," she said.

The hangups are just another set of obstacles for the project.

Highway 1/17 Auxiliary Lanes Project



The project will add new merge lanes on and off Highway 1 at Highway 17. The additional lanes will extend down to the La Fonda Avenue overpass. The project will not change the Fishhook, the sharp curve where northbound Highway 1 hits southbound Highway 17.

In 1985, the county Regional Transportation Commission asked Caltrans to look at improv-

ing the junction of highways 1 and 17 to safely handle more traffic, but funding, controversy and

other snags held the project up until the state Transportation Commission awarded the needed construction money last year.

The interchange has not changed much since it was built in the late 1950s.

The current plan would add merge lanes, build sound walls and realign the Emeline Avenue offramp, among other things. No changes will be made to the Fishhook, the sharp curve where northbound Highway 1 meets southbound Highway 17.

One sign put up Thursday reads, "Hwy 1/17 Merge Lanes Project, Start Date: Spring 2006, Info: 888/836-0866 or http://hwy1-17.caltrans.ca.gov."

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