

Panel weighs Highway 1 tax options

Funds for proposed widening would require voter approval

By **STETT HOLBROOK**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ — It might be at the gas pump, the corner store or where you live, but a tax to pay for widening Highway 1 appears headed this way. If voters approve it.

The cost and logistics of widening the local stretch of the chronically congested highway haven't been worked out, but on Dec. 6 the county Regional Transportation Commission will discuss placing a tax measure before voters.

The panel has not committed to a tax plan, but Linda Wilshusen, commission executive director, said it will be essential given the estimated \$100 million to \$200 million cost to widen the

highway from Santa Cruz to Aptos.

"As far as I'm concerned — and as far as Caltrans is concerned — it's a given," she said.

What happens if a tax measure fails has not been addressed.

So far the commission has discussed a sales tax or gas tax to help fund the project. But commission staff is now recommending the agency also consider a "benefit assessment district." Such tax districts target those who would benefit from a project.

In the case of Highway 1, the district could include Mid-County and Pajaro Valley residents since they use the highway the most, but exclude San Lorenzo Valley and North County residents, Wilshusen said.

Two transportation experts consulted by the commission proposed the assessment district, Wilshusen said.

The earliest a tax could be on the ballot is November 2002, but Commissioner Jan Beautz, a widening supporter, said that's unlikely. Although a special election is possible, the most likely scenario would be a tax vote in March or November 2004.

Earlier this month, Commissioner Mardi Wormhoudt suggested moving quickly to put a tax question on the ballot. While she doesn't favor widening, she said it's important to know if county residents are willing to tax themselves to pay for the project before the commission spends more

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A-12 SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL Thursday, November 29, 2001



The afternoon commute crawls past the Morrissey Boulevard crossing over Highway 1 earlier this year.

Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel file

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time and money on it. Her motion failed on a 5-5 vote.

Other commissioners said they didn't want to move forward on a tax until the agency had more project details and the time to sell it to the public.

Another key decision the commission must make is whether it or the county Board of Supervisors will spon-

sor the tax measure. Giving county supervisors the authority could make it easier to pass a measure since the board could propose a general-purpose tax, which requires a simple majority vote. Any tax with a specific purpose, like a Highway 1 tax proposed by the transportation commission, would require a two-thirds voter approval.

But handing the authority to the board could raise the

hackles of tax critics who could accuse the transportation board of simply trying to skirt the two-thirds requirement.

The county Regional Transportation Commission meets at 9 a.m. Dec. 6 in the Board of Supervisors Chamber, 701 Ocean St. Santa Cruz.

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