

Highway 1 widening years away

✓ *Highways*
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Though the study to widen the 6.5-mile stretch of Highway 1 between Aptos and Santa Cruz is nearly finished, the state Department of Transportation could be traveling a much longer, winding road to complete the project.

Even after the project gains Regional Transportation Commission approval, an environmental impact report will take eight years to complete, according to Claudia Espino, Caltrans senior design engineer.

"You have very environmentally sensitive areas all over that corridor," Espino said. "They all have to be studied as to how this project will impact them."

Caltrans must show the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that the project option they have chosen for the widening will have the least environmental impact, she said.

The delay could mean more of the same for already snarled traffic between State Park Drive in Aptos and Morrissey Boulevard in Santa Cruz.

But while motorists wait, Espino said there may be some temporary solutions. Those include ramp metering and the possible use of auxiliary lanes, which are lanes between ramps.

Cost estimates for the project have ranged from \$100 million to \$200 million, although there will be no final estimate until Caltrans has completed a report on costs, according to Karena Pushnik of the Regional Transportation Commission. That report is required before funding can be requested.

For now, Caltrans is looking at the project's next phase — not construction costs, Espino said.

During the next phase, officials will continue to study project alternatives, hold public hearings and follow through on the environmental impact study. That phase could begin within the next year if the project is approved by the commission, Espino said.

Though the panel has not committed to a tax plan, voters could be called upon to raise funds for the widening. The earliest a tax proposal could land on the ballot is November 2002.

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