



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Traffic crawls southbound Thursday on Highway 1 in Santa Cruz.

Highway project marks one year

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1/17 road closures

With its road closures, traffic backups and ear-splitting noise, the Highway 1/17 Merge Lanes Project might seem an inspiration for road rage, not watercolors.

But for Santa Cruz resident Sally Matheson, whose home sits just blocks from the construction, the work to widen the county's busiest interchange to six lanes makes her want to pick up the paintbrush.

"I thought, well, I can sit here and complain or I can watch the process," she said.

It's been a little more than a year since crews began clearing trees and revving up for the project. Caltrans officials say more than one third of the work is complete and crews are on schedule to wrap up in fall of 2009.

For some residents, the construc-

■ Market Street under Highway 1 is closed but should reopen at the end of April.

■ The Morrissey Boulevard ramps on the west side of Highway 1 should reopen in mid-summer.

■ Branciforte Avenue is scheduled to close in June for nine months so workers can replace the bridge over Highway 1.

■ Emeline Avenue offramp closed until the project nears completion.

Source: Caltrans

tion has meant leaving earlier for work, finding new routes around the county and sitting in more traffic. But for Matheson, this first year

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Project

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has given her time to finish 100 watercolor paintings of the project, which are popular at Caltrans meetings and with construction workers near her home.

Hers is just one of many ways that drivers on the road and those who live nearby have found to deal with the county's biggest road overhaul since Highway 1 was built in the 1950s.

"They're putting up quite an amazing project, with all the rebar and the different workers," Matheson said.

So far, most parts of Highway 1 have been stretched as wide as they will go. Retaining walls and soundwalls have been built, on- and offramps are being adjusted, and the corridor where the wider highway will sit is apparent.

Later this year, expansion on Highway 17 is due to start.

When finished, the project will widen the two highways to six lanes across from Pasatiempo overcrossing on Highway 17 to Morrissey Boulevard on Highway 1. No changes will be made to the Fishhook, the sharp curve where northbound Highway 1 meets southbound Highway 17.

When this project wraps up, Caltrans is expected to continue wid-

ening Highway 1 down to Soquel Avenue.

The work, which officially began last February, is a long time coming. In 1985, the county Regional Transportation Commission asked Caltrans to look at improving 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 funding in 2005.

While Caltrans officials say the project should finish on time, it has already run about \$10 million over budget, bringing the total to more than \$50 million.

It also has its critics. Some neighbors can't stand the dust that has regularly coated their cars, or the noisy pounding of giant steel beams into the ground, which rattles kitchen glasses and living room furniture. Others who oppose the proposed widening of Highway 1 past Aptos look to the 1/17 construction as an example of what drivers can expect for years if the larger project is funded.

Some drivers, like Gary Jones of Aptos, wonder if it will make much difference in the notoriously gridlocked traffic.

When the highways funnel back down to two lanes, traffic will back up again, he said. Jones also speaks from experience: "I lived in Los Angeles from 1960 to 1989, and it never got better," he said.

Progress on 1/17 work

THE PAST YEAR

■ Crews have driven 26,000 linear feet of steel pile, which put end-to-end would be more than five miles.

■ Placed more than 3,000 cubic yards of concrete, which could fill 333 concrete mixer trucks.

■ Excavated enough dirt to fill more than 5,500, 10-wheel dump trucks.

■ Finished five retaining walls and five soundwalls.

■ Widened the Highway 1 bridge over Market Street and connected it in the middle, between the

north- and southbound lanes.

THE NEXT YEAR

■ Reopen Market Street later this month.

■ Close Branciforte Avenue for about 10 months, so crews can build a new Highway 1 crossing.

■ Finish a new connector between northbound Highway 1 and northbound Highway 17.

■ Widen the bridges over Carbonera and Branciforte creeks and connect them in the middle, between the north- and southbound lanes.

■ Begin widening on Highway 17.

Source: Caltrans

But for many, it's just something to deal with.

Pizza My Heart delivery driver Gabriel Kleiner said he tries to skip the highway entirely, usually taking surface streets to Morrissey Boulevard and crossing there for homes on the other side of Highway 1.

That's not an option for bus driver Bonnie Morr of the Santa Cruz Metropolitan Transit District, who said the construction has subsequently delayed almost every route Metro runs. About half the district's buses drive through the interchange, and the others are delayed with missed connec-

tions and other issues stemming from the work.

"We're late just about everywhere," Morr said.

And the work remains an inspiration for Matheson, who does not display the paintings to the public but does snap a few digital photos every hour, and then paints them inside her house.

"They all seem to know what they're doing and they're all dressed in pretty colors of lime green and orange," she said. "It's a nice contrast."

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