



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

'Hook still snagging drivers

Highways

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But motorists seem to be adjusting to fewer lanes at interchange

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SANTA CRUZ — The black skid marks are ominous. Just about everyone — from transportation officials to drivers themselves — expected the two-lane-to-one-lane consolidation at the Fishhook to cause some confusion.

And it did. Two weeks into the change, northbound drivers on Highway 1 toward the Highway 17 off ramp still see cars dodging in and out across the "exit only" lanes. And while the marks have decreased and the panicked lane-switchers are fewer, traffic has definitely slowed at least a little.

Transportation officials expect the change

will make the Fishhook safer once drivers get used to it. The most recent statistics show the interchange where northbound 1 hooks into southbound 17 has an accident rate at least three times greater than the rate at more conventional interchanges.

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Signs on northbound Highway 1 announcing fewer lanes on the Fishhook still seem to catch some drivers by surprise.

Fishhook

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The change was made to improve safety at the Fishhook, not reduce congestion. Slowing traffic near the interchange has been frustrating for drivers in a rush on the already-congested highway. But the slowdown isn't enough to make the state Department of Transportation abandon the project without some evidence it's unsafe.

Linda Wilshusen, executive director of the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission, said it's too early to judge the effectiveness of the work but she's hearing that people are getting used to the change.

"The first few days people really had a difficult time with it, but I hear this week it's working better and people are feeling the benefits of not having to merge so abruptly and get caught," Wilshusen said.

The changes essentially eliminated the more dangerous left lane of the merge from northbound 1 onto southbound 17 toward Santa Cruz. The plan, approved by the Transportation Commission, has created two separate lanes as drivers near the interchange from northbound 1. The left is for the Fishhook, which leads to Ocean Street, Highway 9 or Mission Street and the right lane is to northbound 17 and Silicon Valley.

The trick when there were two lanes was to stay in the right lane because the left lane caused nightmares as drivers from Highway 1 attempted to merge with the onslaught of Highway 17 traffic. Each day, some 59,000 drivers take that Highway 17 path.

Caltrans engineers continue to observe the traffic volume at the hook, which recently numbered 12,200 trips a day. Caltrans believes the changes won't cause unworkable congestion and the one lane can handle that amount of traffic.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

How is the one-lane fishhook design affecting your drive? Drop us a line at P.O. Box 638, Santa Cruz, CA 95061 or e-mail your response to dmiller@santa-cruz.com (the hyphen is included). Please, no phone calls.