

Small town's new stoplight a big topic

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BOULDER CREEK — The installation of Boulder Creek's first stoplight has become a hot topic in this little town.

One sure way to get strangers talking is to ask about the stoplight in any public place.

Some people hate the light, and want it torn out immediately.

Some people love the light, and wish it had been installed years ago.

But most people plan to wait another few weeks and then decide whether they love it or hate it.

Boulder Creek is bisected by Highway 9, a winding two-lane road that had relatively little traffic until the Oct. 17 earthquake closed Highway 17, the main route to work for thousands of Santa Cruz's computer commuters.

For the first two weeks after the quake, downtown Boulder Creek was an unwilling witness to horrific daily traffic jams. Commuters reported spending three hours driving from the summit to Boulder Creek, a trip that normally takes less than a half-hour.

The three-way stop sign at the intersection of Highways 9 and 236 was slowing traffic by causing each car to stop, so County Supervisor Fred Keeley arranged for a temporary stoplight to be installed.

Some locals were incensed when the county erected a three-way stop sign at the intersection several years ago, and the installation of the traffic light several days after the quake caused a similar stir.

"Not a whole lot happens here," said a worker at the Harvest Bakery. "But one morning I noticed this place was pretty empty, so I looked down the street. And there are all these workers putting up the lights, and all these retired guys standing around watching them saying, 'We don't need that light, you're wasting your time.'"

"It more of an emotional issue than a practical thing," said Terry Vierra, owner of Boulder Creek Liquors. "It symbolizes what people moved up here to get away from."

The light's electrical cables particularly bother some people. Overhead utility wires in downtown Boulder Creek were placed underground years ago, and the bundles of cable now hanging over the main intersection are seen as a blight. The cables also prevent helicopters from landing in the intersection, which is occasionally necessary during medical emergencies.

There are few clear areas big enough to land a chopper in the densely wooded mountains, and if a helicopter is needed, it must now fly to the Boulder Creek Golf and Country Club several miles up Highway 236.

Merchant Barry Albright, owner of Rumplestiltskins clothing store, likes the lights. The county was planning to install a light by 1992 anyway, he said, and might as well leave the temporary light in place.