

Fishhook the focus of debate

Highways

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SANTA CRUZ — Are Fishhook improvements needed or should \$31 million be spent instead on relieving congestion on a 20-mile stretch of Highway 1?

That's one of the questions facing the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission when it holds a public hearing Thursday. The commission meeting begins at 8:30 a.m., and the public hearing is expected to start at 9 a.m.

One proposal under consideration is spending \$31 million on safety-related improvements at the Highway 1/17 interchange, the so-called Fishhook. The California Department of Transportation has the money to spend on the project, which could include more merge lanes and related improvements.

If the 10-member commission can't make a decision Thursday, the project would be delayed at least six months beyond the projected March 1999 start date.

For some commissioners, such as Santa Cruz City Councilman Michael Rotkin, interchange improvements aren't worth \$31 million when the money — or at least some of it — could be used to actually improve congestion on Highway 1. There also are questions about whether the changes would make the interchange safer.

But other commissioners, including Santa Cruz County Supervisor Jeff Almquist, said the safety improvements are necessary because they also will reduce gridlock at the interchange.

Almquist pointed to six areas near the Fishhook that have accident rates at least 3 times the state average, according to figures from Caltrans.

In a one-year period, 128 accidents occurred at the northbound Highway 1/9 intersection, which would be included in the improvements.

That was followed by 111 accidents, including 48 injury accidents, along northbound Highway 1 between Morrissey Boulevard and the interchange.

The recommendation before the commission, which comes from the commission's Highway 1/17 Safety Task Force and commission staff, is to add merge lanes to southbound Highway 1 from the interchange to a half-mile south of Morrissey and add merge lanes to northbound Highway 1 from Morrissey to Highway 17 at Pasatiempo.

Among the other recommendations is to reduce the speed limit to 55 mph on Highway 1 between the Branciforte overcrossing and northbound Highway 17.

Caltrans' original recommendation was to add more merge lanes than the commission staff is recommending.

The Santa Cruz Area Chamber of Commerce is supporting interchange improvements, citing the high accident rates. According to a chamber survey, 70 percent of its members believe doing nothing is not an option, while 28 percent stated that doing nothing was acceptable.

The interchange improvements are a separate project from the commission's Major Transportation Investment Study commissioned in August. That 1,000-page study identifies eight alternatives to relieve congestion on Highway 1, including widening the highway and building a combined bus route, bike-way and weekend train service or a rail line.

Those projects would cost between \$100 million and \$384 million, and most likely would require a sales-tax increase.