

Merchants offer solution to Rancho del Mar traffic

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If the County Planning Commission listens to Aptos businessmen, they will forget about widening Soquel Drive in front of Rancho del Mar and take care of the real cause of traffic problems in the area — the stopsign at Spreckels and Soquel Drive.

Planning Department representatives Linda Niebank and Ron Marquez met yesterday at Aptos Library with residents and those who have businesses in and near Rancho del Mar, to hear how they feel about the proposed expansion of Soquel Drive.

The Planning Commission will consider the project again at its 10 a.m. meeting Wednesday in the County Government Building.

The road-widening idea started at the Planning Department when Rancho Del Mar shopping center owner, James Fenton, applied for a permit to expand the Safeway store.

While the expansion will be into two existing store spaces and new construction will be only 500 square feet, planners felt the impact on Soquel Drive and State Park Drive will be increased enough to warrant adding another lane on Soquel Drive. About 14,000 cars travel that stretch of road every day, which Marquez said "may well be what's defined as capacity." A third lane, he said, would allow 21,000 to 25,000 cars to pass through with few traffic tie-ups.

Planners want Fenton to pay for half the improvements. Estimates for the project have ranged from \$250,000 to \$750,000.

"There's a certain urgency because of the Rancho del Mar situation," said Marquez, who works in the County transportation and planning section. "The bottom line is there isn't any funds for road improvements. The way to get funds is to ask new development to pay for that. There are problems (on Soquel Drive). It's more than a two-lane road can handle."

But the 20 people in the audience disagreed. Traffic back-ups on Soquel Drive going into Aptos Village, they said, are caused by cars having to stop at the trestle stopsigns at Soquel Drive and Spreckels, not because Soquel Drive is too narrow.

Bill Potter, of Kendall and Potter Realtors, located across Soquel Drive from Rancho del Mar, suggested the stopsign be replaced with a stoplight that is green on Soquel Drive until cars on Spreckels trip it to a red signal.

"Spreckels is the problem, that's where the problem is," said Potter.

Potter said Soquel Drive could be widened, but unless the stopsign is removed, traffic will still back up.

"You still have to stop at that damned arterial sign," said Potter. "Traffic is still going to back up."

Residents and businesses could petition the county supervisors for removal of the signs. Supervisors would have the Department of Public Works consider the petition for the required ordinance to remove the signs. The process, said Marquez, would take 30 to 40 days.

A stoplight could take up to a year to install, and would cost

about \$100,000. There may or may not be money available for that, he said after the meeting.

County planners recommend that Soquel Drive, from State Park Drive to the railroad trestle, be increased to three 12-foot-wide lanes, with a five-foot shoulder on either side for bicycles and six-foot sidewalks. The center lane would be for left turns, and would be marked in certain areas with left-turn pockets. Construction would begin in three to five years, if the project is approved as it stands.

Marquez and Niebank yesterday were repeatedly told that three lanes aren't necessary at this time and should the project proceed, bicycle and pedestrian provisions certainly shouldn't be as large as proposed.

Aptos accountant, Bob McKenzie, summed up the audience opposition when he told Niebank and Marquez, "I'd like to see bicycles the hell off Soquel Drive."

The audience complained that bicyclists don't obey traffic laws, don't pay road taxes, hit pedestrians and ride wherever they please — namely, in the car lanes.

Sidewalks were unpopular because people felt they wouldn't be used because of the uneven terrain. In addition, one man commented that sidewalks would turn into "a skateboard heaven," and could result in accidents if skateboarders fell into traffic.