



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos

Available parking spaces on both sides of Highway 9 through Ben Lomond would be reduced if a Caltrans plan is approved.

Businesses, residents divided over Caltrans highway project

Left-turn lane plan would trim number of parking spaces

By **JONDI GUMZ**
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With accidents along Highway 9 here exceeding the state average, Caltrans wants to do something to improve safety.

But the solution proposed by state officials — adding a lane in downtown Ben Lomond for left turns — would take away parking for local businesses on Highway 9, such as Coffee 9, Spanky's gas station, and Henfling's.

"We're a fast-paced coffeehouse," said Debbie Sanchez of Coffee 9, who could lose 10 parking spaces in front of her shop. "I won't have enough parking to sustain my business."

Caltrans spokeswoman Jenny Linzner said the accident rate is the driving force behind the project.

Statistics over the past three years show five accidents per million vehicle miles in Ben Lomond, compared to a statewide average of three.

Once the state highway is upgraded, diagonal parking in the state right-of-way, such as that at Coffee 9, would not be allowed, Linzner explained. That could eliminate 17 parking spaces townwide.

Besides the additional turn lane, which is estimated to cost \$700,000, a beautification project is proposed involving installation of curbs, gutters, sidewalks, streetlights, benches, and landscaping.

Such improvements were initially proposed 10 years ago when the town plan was written but funding didn't arrive until 1998, when county engineer John Presleigh landed a \$650,000 federal grant.

Linzner presented the Caltrans proposal at an informational session attended by about 50 people Thursday night. She urged residents to offer alternatives, saying plans are "very preliminary."

People are divided over the improvements. Some residents oppose the streetscape project, saying they prefer a rural look, although



Debbie Sanchez, owner of Coffee 9, contends that she will lose critical customer parking if Caltrans' plan to establish a two-way turn lane on Highway 9 is OK'd.

members of the Ben Lomond Business Association support it.

"We want to see curbs, gutters and drainage," said Paul Ramm of Rammco Construction, vice president of the business association. "It will improve the town."

Ramm's wife, Kerry, also supports the project even though she is a patron of Coffee 9. Because of the growing traffic, it's much more dangerous for parked cars to back into Highway 9, she said.

She pointed out that business owners can get sidewalks at no expense this way rather than foot the bill themselves, as Ben Lomond Market was required to do during a recent upgrade.

Some people suggested that to reduce accidents, traffic must slow down. They proposed a stop sign or another traffic light near Coffee 9. The town got its first traffic light, on Highway 9 at Mill Street, four years ago,

Others said the highway should be patrolled to discourage speeders or the speed

limit should be lowered.

Linzner said some of those suggestions aren't feasible. Caltrans is reluctant to put stop signs on a state highway, she said, and the speed limit can't be lowered because of state laws prohibiting "speed traps."

County Supervisor Jeff Almquist said one possible solution to the parking problem for Coffee 9 is to locate a parking lot behind the building. He urged residents to offer suggestions to Caltrans, which is expected to return to Ben Lomond in January or February with at least two designs for the project.

"We have to figure out a way for the town to evolve," said Bill Pedersen, president of the Ben Lomond Business Association. "There's going to have to be some creativity."

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