

# Highways Tow trucks to patrol highway

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Highway 17 program to aid  
vehicles hit by breakdown

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SANTA CRUZ — Like white knights in shining armor, tow trucks soon will be roaming Highway 17 to help motorists in distress.

The county Regional Transportation Commission will consider signing an agreement today to get a two-year pilot program started.

The program's cost, estimated at \$230,750 for two years, would be funded by Caltrans and from the \$1 surcharge on vehicle registration.

The program would be administered by the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, the local commission's counterpart in the San Francisco Bay Area which has operated tow service since 1992 and which plans to extend it to the Santa Clara County side of Highway 17.

It makes sense for the tow trucks to run on both sides of the Summit, said Teresa Buika of the Regional Transportation Commission.

If all goes as planned, starting in April drivers of specially-built tow trucks painted white will help stranded motorists from the Summit to Scotts Valley from 6:30-9:30 a.m. and from 3:30-6:30 p.m. weekdays.

This would be the first time stranded motorists on Highway 17 would get free aid since Alan Little roamed the highway unofficially as the Road Ranger in the early '80s.

There's even the possibility that the tow trucks may

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## Tow trucks

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operate on summer weekends when tourist traffic is heavy. "Our commission is really interested in the summer commute program from Memorial Day to Labor Day for the morning commute from San Jose to Santa Cruz and the evening commute from Santa Cruz to San Jose," said Buika.

"That is when the CHP says it gets overwhelmed with overheating and accidents that tie up traffic."

If a summer program is started, it would be the first of its kind in California. In all other areas with so-called freeway service patrols, tow trucks operate only during the weekday commute.

The Regional Transportation Commission would like to start a summer program on Memorial Day, but it would have to get agreement from the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, Buika said.

Tow trucks operate over 100 miles of freeway in the San Francisco Bay Area, said Susan Terry of the Metropolitan Transportation Commission.

The program, operated with the state Department of

Transportation and the Highway Patrol, started in the summer of 1992 at the interchange of Highways 680 and 84 in Walnut Creek.

Since then, the program has expanded from Marin County to Santa Clara County. Tow trucks have assisted 50,000 motorists.

The commission contracts with private towing companies whose drivers are specially trained by the California Highway Patrol.

When a stranded motorist is sighted, the tow truck driver stops and first tries to get the vehicle operating. If that doesn't work, the vehicle is towed to a spot where the motorist can call for more help.

One of the main advantages, said Terry, is easing congestion by getting the stranded motorist off the highway as quickly as possible.

"It is a win-win situation for everyone," said Terry. "The roads get cleared more quickly. The CHP gets some help because they really can't get vehicles going again. And people love it. They find out they don't have to pay and they are stunned."