NEW DIRECTION FOR HWY. 101

County leaders push for additional lanes to ease congestion

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Ten years ago, after 4,000 South Coast residents signed petitions protesting a plan to widen Highway 101 south of Milpas Street, the politicians of Santa Barbara County sent Caltrans packing, with a "thanks, but no thanks."

Today, with 25,000 commuters coming and going daily, most of them Ventura residents, it takes up to 60 minutes to drive 12 miles on the four-lane section between Carpinteria and Santa Barbara at rush hour.

Now the tables have turned -- county leaders are begging the state to add lanes to Highway 101 and Caltrans is no longer gung-ho about freeway widening.

On Thursday, the county Association of Governments is expected to set the tone for local transportation projects for the next decade, by requiring additional lanes as part of a $1.6 million plan for congestion relief on 101. Now, however, it's not "widening," but "demand reduction" that is Caltrans' watchword.

Even before the planning starts, the North County majority on the association board wants to mandate extra lanes on the four-lane stretch through Carpinteria, Summerland and Montecito, where the rush-hour traffic is the worst. The project would take at least 11 years to build and cost more than $300 million.

"We have to get some concrete on the ground," said Santa Maria Mayor Larry Lavagnino, chairman of the 13-member board. "Why haven't we done it already? This is typical Santa Barbara. It's the only place in California where it takes 2,000 years to do anything.

"All I want to do is move cars and see that that bottleneck is solved. That's my job."

But some South Coast board members, joined by Caltrans, say that moving people, not cars, should be the focus of future transportation projects. They want alternatives to the car to get the same consideration during the planning stages as pouring new concrete. By alternatives, they mean express buses, commuter trains, ferryboats and van pools, and also staggered work hours, telecommuting and building affordable housing close to jobs.

"If you widen the freeway, you undercut the ridership base for buses and trains," said Santa Barbara Councilman Gregg Hart, an association board member. "You won't have enough money to do both. A wider freeway would get full of traffic very quickly. Downtown Santa Barbara would be clogged all the way to Goleta."
"It seems so simple. But folks in the North County don't live in towns like this, where the urban core is 15 miles long, and thousands of cars are injected into the freeway, coming and going at different places."

To Rick Anderson, a Ventura resident who endures the daily commute, widening 101 sounds good, but a train ride sounds better. Mr. Anderson has timed his fastest car trip at 43 minutes.

"It's pretty much always bad, and Thursdays and Fridays are terrible," Mr. Anderson said. "It's a lot of single people like me, driving one car back and forth every day -- and all because there's not enough affordable housing in Santa Barbara. It's ridiculous. There should be a light-rail train from Santa Barbara to Ventura that runs every day."

The six-lane project south of Milpas was rejected by the South Coast community in 1993 because it did not provide a long-term solution to congestion, and because it would obliterate 3,000 shrubs and trees -- the unique "Gateway to Santa Barbara."

The landscaping along this stretch boasts 700 large trees, including 37 oaks that were planted in 1928 north of Carpinteria in memory of World War I veterans.

"It's a huge shift from what most freeways look like," said Marc Chytilo, a local air-quality and transportation attorney. "The scenic values are substantial. It's what defines our community."

Gregg Albright, the regional Caltrans director for the Central Coast, was on the design team as the landscape architect for the original six-lane project. Now, he says, any new lanes must help promote mass transportation.

"It's not the time to use an old model and widen, widen, widen," Mr. Albright said. "In 1993, we didn't listen very well. Our plan was not aesthetic, and it would have continued the idea of everybody driving their cars. Now, more and more, Caltrans' position is, 'We don't want to widen from four lanes to six lanes to eight lanes.' I want to see us promote a better transit system, better van pooling and carpooling."

If a new South Coast 101 plan concludes that widening the freeway south of Milpas will help relieve congestion, Mr. Albright said, "I will jump on that."

But any new lanes, he said, should be reserved for express buses, van pools and carpools.

"Short of that, why would I want to be engaged in an effort that said, 'Go widen?'" Mr. Albright asked. "We can't continue in this society where everybody gets to drive anywhere they want to go and expect a good flow of traffic. That means I would have to be out there with a dozen lanes.

"I'm not interested in cars. I'm interested in people. If we lose this opportunity to shine the light of good science on a whole menu of solutions, I'll be sick."

STUCK IN TRAFFIC

Santa Barbara went through a six-lane project in the late 1980s, when the corridor from Carrillo
Street to Fairview Avenue was widened; and again in the early 1990s, between Carrillo and Milpas.

A decade later, the traffic barely creeps along on six lanes at rush hour, affecting many more drivers than on the four lanes south of Milpas. Association studies show that widening 101 south of Milpas could shift even more congestion north through Santa Barbara.

"If what we adopt is a car-oriented strategy, we'll never, ever get out of the vicious circle," said Grant House, a Santa Barbara planning commissioner and a founder of the Coalition for Sustainable Transportation, a nonprofit group. "It's a huge leap into the past. Even if we made an express bus and van pool lane, we'd still have all those people stuck in traffic on the other two lanes. Rail would move more people through the corridor."

The highest accident rate on the South Coast 101 occurs on the six lanes between Milpas and Fairview. Between 1995 and 1999, there were 22 deaths and 1,152 injuries on 101 between the Ventura County line and Winchester Canyon Road. Out of 2,806 total accidents on this stretch, the studies show, 67 percent occurred on the six-lane section north of Milpas.

"We have a fairly enormous problem that we're making worse," said Goleta Mayor Jack Hawxhurst, an association board member. "Are we going to be a big city? That's the first decision. The third lane is a dead-end solution."

Mr. Hawxhurst favors freezing new job growth on the South Coast. Since the last six-lane project was built here, he notes, 15,000 jobs have been created through commercial and industrial growth, far outpacing the number of new homes and apartments. If the pattern continues, an association study shows, new employment is forecast to increase by 30 percent by 2020, while housing will increase only 10 percent -- a formula guaranteed to fuel more commuter traffic on 101.

Meanwhile, more and more people are driving alone; and carpooling is down, not up. Association studies show 73 percent of commuters to Santa Barbara and Goleta drove alone in 2000, compared to 67 percent in 1997. Carpoolers represented 18 percent of commuters in 1993; by 2000, they made up only 14 percent. Only 4 percent of commuters in 2000 took the bus.

"Buses and bicycles, in my mind, have been totally unsuccessful in getting people out of their cars," Mr. Lavagnino said. "Putting more buses on the road is not going to solve the problem."

In the mid-1990s, the association promised to build some "spot" improvements on 101, and it hired a consulting firm to study transportation alternatives. The study recommended fleets of buses called Freeway Flyers, increases in downtown parking fees to deter people from driving and an ordinance requiring employers to help reduce commuter traffic.

Today, the $80 million "spot" projects are still short $30 million. The Coastal Express, a public bus service, makes only 11 round-trips daily from Ventura to Goleta. Only one is an express trip, and it runs only in the morning. Some of the other recommendations from 1993 -- raising parking fees and requiring employer participation -- were thrown out amid protests from businesses.
The advocates of widening say it's a lost cause, anyway, getting people out of their cars.

"What's so bad about cars?" asked Carpinteria Councilman Gregory Gandrud, who has set up a political action committee and a Web site to promote freeway widening. Mr. Gandrud said he has received more than $5,000 in donations to date.

"Cars give people the freedom to go where they want, when they want," he said. "We just need to focus on getting the extra lanes as fast as possible. Until we do, our options are extremely limited."

Mr. Gandrud said he would favor building "hot lanes," or express toll lanes, south of Milpas, where buses and carpools could ride for free and single drivers would pay.

Joe Armendariz, executive director of the Santa Barbara County Taxpayers Association, said that in 1989, when the voters approved the half-cent increase in the sales tax known as Measure D, they said they wanted to widen 101. If the freeway could be safely restriped to three lanes, using the freeway shoulders, that would be OK, too, Mr. Armendariz said.

"We don't have to make the freeway bigger, but it has to be more efficient," he said. "We don't have some sort of fetish for shovels and jackhammers. We want to make sure that the taxpayers' intent is honored."

But Mr. Albright of Caltrans cautions that restriping is no easy fix. It's been done in Los Angeles, he said, but it results in more accidents and longer delays for ambulances.

"We'd like a highway where you don't pay with your life for a flat tire," Mr. Albright said.

WIDENING BY 2015?

No matter what the politicians decide on Thursday, the association staff estimates it would take more than a decade to add two new freeway lanes south of Milpas. That includes four years of environmental review and four years of construction. The project would not be completed until 2015.

The only new asphalt during the next 10 years on 101 likely will come from the three "spot" improvements -- essentially mini-widening projects -- that were approved by the association board in 1996 for Montecito, Summerland and Carpinteria. Construction could begin next year, if the board votes on Thursday to free up $10 million in Measure D funds.

With the spot improvements alone, commuters would be confronted with construction on 101 from 2004 to 2011. If a full widening project gets under way, the work would continue another four years, taking off from where the smaller projects end. So even some of the most vocal supporters of widening concede that for the next decade or more, the best relief for commuters may be to leave the car at home.

"Maybe we should be adding more bus service now," Mr. Gandrud said.
Mr. Armendariz, who works at home, suggested that many of the county's employees could telecommute instead of drive.

And Solvang Mayor pro-tem David Smyser, an association board member who drafted the recommendation that would require new lanes on 101, said more buses and commuter park-and-ride lots, plus changes in working hours, could help alleviate congestion while the widening proceeds.

"It really never was intended that one overshadow the other," he said. "The commuter who's out there, sitting in traffic, wants a solution. Anything short of that will result in a lack of public confidence."

101 MEETING

The Santa Barbara County Association of Governments distributes local, state and federal funds for regional transportation projects. The 13-member board is made up of the five county supervisors and one council member each from the cities of Buellton, Carpinteria, Goleta, Guadalupe, Lompoc, Santa Barbara, Santa Maria and Solvang.

The association will meet to discuss Highway 101 from 8:30 a.m. to noon Thursday in the Board of Supervisors hearing room at the County Administration Building in Santa Barbara.