

## **Rough spots ahead for South Coast commuters**

Highway construction projects planned for next 7 years

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By MELINDA BURNS

NEWS-PRESS SENIOR WRITER

One thing is for sure: The rush-hour traffic on Highway 101 south of Milpas Street will get worse before it gets better.

From 2004 to 2011, part of the freeway through Montecito, Summerland and Carpinteria will be under construction as three "spot" widening projects get under way.

The projects, costing \$80 million, were approved by the county Association of Governments in 1996, after the community rejected a proposal to widen 101 south of Milpas to six lanes.

"People don't realize how heinous it's going to be," said Marc Chytilo, a Santa Barbara transportation and air quality attorney. "They're complaining about congestion now. Just wait."

The "spot" projects will not ease congestion in the whole four-lane corridor to the Ventura County line, but they will improve safety and traffic flow along some of the most crowded sections, Caltrans officials say. Moreover, they can be easily folded into a larger widening project in the future, should the community decide it wants one, said Gregg Albright, the regional Caltrans director.

"They will take a long time to deliver, but they're logical, common-sense first steps," he said.

On Thursday, the association board will decide whether to use more than \$10 million in local money to move the projects forward until the state can repay the money. The funds would come from Measure D, a half-cent increase in the sales tax that was approved by county voters in 1989. The total funding shortfall for the 101 projects is \$31 million.

Gregg Albright, the regional director for Caltrans, says the inevitable delays will provide an opportunity to offer commuters an efficient bus service. That's what Caltrans did during construction of additional lanes on the Cuesta Grade on 101, just north of San Luis Obispo. When the project was finished, many of the bus riders chose to continue commuting by bus.

"It will not be attractive to live with construction spread over so many years," Mr. Albright said of the South Coast projects. "But if you have lemons, you make lemonade. Let's put together a very aggressive transit program and park-and-ride lots, and employers doing vanpooling and carpooling. That's what it's all about."

The board will consider expanding bus service on Thursday when it takes up a proposal to spend \$1.5 million in Measure D funds to subsidize the Coastal Express, a bus service from Ventura to

Goleta. From the present 11 round trips daily, the service would expand to 15 or 16.

## A NEW BIKEWAY

With Measure D funds, the work on an auxiliary lane and a bikeway between Evans Avenue and Sheffield Drive on the northbound side of 101 in Summerland could begin next year, association officials say.

Sheffield is one of the hot spots for rear-end accidents on the South Coast as drivers gather speed coming over the hill only to be confronted by a line of stopped cars. About 20 accidents a year occur here, according to an association study. An auxiliary lane from Evans to Sheffield would provide additional distance for merging cars to enter 101.

The two-lane bikeway that is planned next to that lane on the northbound side of 101 would provide a missing link through Summerland. Presently, cyclists must ride up Ortega Hill or risk their lives on the freeway. The new bikeway would accommodate pedestrians, too.

## FIXING THE BOTTLENECK

The most ambitious Caltrans project in the next decade on 101 is designed to ease the congestion between the Hot Springs Road-Cabrillo Boulevard interchange and Milpas Street.

A third lane is planned on the southbound side of the Milpas Street bridge, where the freeway narrows to four lanes and the rush-hour traffic weaves back and forth, entering and exiting. Milpas is the worst interchange for accidents on the South Coast freeway, with about 30 accidents per year.

The extra lane would extend to the Cabrillo interchange, accommodating the high volume of traffic that exits at Hot Springs -- 9,000 cars per day.

On the northbound side of 101, auxiliary lanes would connect Milpas and Salinas Street, and Cabrillo and Salinas, allowing traffic to enter and exit without backing up.

In addition, a new undercrossing would connect Cacique Street to the waterfront, and a roundabout would replace a three-way stop where Old Coast Highway enters Hot Springs and the traffic backs up on Coast Village Road.

Several dozen oaks and sycamores would be cut down as part of the freeway project. A few homes and apartments on Alisos Street would be lost. Several small businesses on Alisos and Indio Muerto Street, including a car repair shop and a limousine service, also could be affected.

If Measure D funding is freed up this week, the lengthy process of buying right-of-way for the project could begin now, Caltrans officials said. At the earliest, they said, groundbreaking could begin in 2006.

The owners of the Santa Barbara Chemical Corp., a small firm that manufactures antifreeze for aerospace companies, are hoping they won't have to leave. A new off-ramp would take out about

20 percent of their property at 927 Indio Muerto -- space that the firm is using to store chemicals at a safe distance.

"It would be very difficult for us to relocate," said Nicholas Kondrats. "And we like it here. People think we're crazy, but we get a cool breeze from the beach."

## WIDENING TWO BRIDGES

Third in line for 101 projects is Carpinteria, where the Linden Avenue and Casitas Pass bridges are slated for widening, beginning in 2007, at a cost of \$20 million each. The freeway ramps at these bridges, where traffic now travels at 25 miles per hour, will be widened and lengthened to allow cars to merge onto 101 more quickly and efficiently. This project would be under construction from 2007 to 2011.

After seven years of construction dust, will South Coast residents opt for four more, to widen the freeway all the way to the county line?

That's anybody's guess. Local taxpayers would likely be called on to pay for a large share of the \$300 million cost. Caltrans is facing potential staffing reductions. Even without the widening, the association faces a \$230 million shortfall in state and federal funding for the North County's "pet" projects -- enlarging the Santa Maria River bridge and sections of Highways 166 and 246. Those projects are on the back burner now.

Mr. Albright says that communities around the country are realizing they cannot build their way out of traffic.

"The old model has outlived its purposefulness," he said. "I tell people, 'Listen, I respect that you have the right to drive, but I'm going to try to give you new alternatives that you may choose to use in the future.' We have to be responsive for the public's need for mobility."

## HWY. 101 MEETING THURSDAY

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 councilmember each from the cities of Buellton, Carpinteria, Goleta, Guadalupe, Lompoc, 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.