Does the council want 101 widened?

OUR OPINION

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Should the 101 be widened? Those five words cause a problem for members of the Santa Barbara City Council. These officials are fond of saying their city is "ground zero" when it comes to debate over whether the highway should expand from two lanes to three.

If so, let residents, employers and commuting workers know where the city's elected officials stand as a group. Let's hear whether they favor laying more asphalt.

Councilman Dr. Dan Secord at last month's untelevised work session of the council members, staff and planning commissioners brought up the notion of putting the matter on a council agenda.

But don't count on seeing it there any time soon -- or ever at all. The people we elect to lead don't want to deal with it.

Instead, the excuse is that the city supports something known as the Highway 101 Implementation Plan, a $1.5 million study that the director of Caltrans District 5 calls an "innovative proposal whose purpose is to build community consensus on an action plan that will relieve congestion in the corridor from the Ventura County line to Winchester Canyon."

Santa Barbara County Association of Governments, made up of elected officials from the county government and eight cities, has been arguing over the proposed study for months.

But the Santa Barbara City Council citing the plan is lame pretext to squirm out of going on record about whether to widen the 101. Santa Barbarans should have a clear idea where their council stands on this matter -- and have a chance to express their own views at a public meeting televised to the entire city.

Do council members who fancy themselves environmentalists want more asphalt that would encourage the use of even more fossil-fuel-eating vehicles to waste resources and pollute our air? Or do they favor, for a change, working regionally with our neighbors in Ventura County on alternative forms of mass transit such as commuter rail? Or do they have other solutions?

Beyond the Santa Barbara council, we think all the local jurisdictions should go on record.

But the idea of a public airing on whether to widen 101 was put before Santa Barbara's leaders last month during their work session, and it's gone nowhere.

They are ducking one of the most pressing matters before this region.