

## **City tells transportation leaders to slow down on Highway 1 project, finish environmental studies first**

Genevieve Bookwalter - Sentinel staff writer

City leaders weighed in on the revved-up debate over widening Highway 1 on Tuesday night, asking county and state transportation officials to conduct an environmental review before adding another lane between Morrissey Boulevard and Soquel Avenue.

City Council members stressed they were not taking a position on whether the project should go forward. Rather, they said, not conducting an environmental review on such a controversial plan would jeopardize Caltrans' and the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission's credibility as they promote the project and cause unnecessary delays.

"If you bring a project this big in this county without an environmental impact report, it is dead on arrival," Councilman Mike Rotkin said.

The debate focused on whether to direct Councilwoman Emily Reilly, the city's representative on the county's Regional Transportation Commission, to support adding auxiliary lanes to Highway 1 between Morrissey and Soquel before an environmental review is complete. As it sits now, Caltrans, the lead agency on the project, has said enough study has been done to render an environmental review unnecessary, and is taking public comment on the reports now. Work could begin as soon as next year.

Mayor Ryan Coonerty said the project would likely cost less to finish if an environmental review is completed first.

If it's not done, transportation leaders "are going to get sued, they're going to lose that lawsuit, and the cost of losing that lawsuit and the construction delays will cost much more than the EIR," Coonerty said.

George Dondero, executive director of the transportation commission, argued that transportation officials have spent more than \$1 million on preliminary studies to show that the proposed project is environmentally sound, and the research was thorough.

"The initial study was no small effort," Dondero said. "Some people seem to portray this as it was lightly done, and I assure you it was a serious effort."

Still, council members voted 6 to 1 to direct Reilly to push for the environmental study, with Councilwoman Lynn Robinson voting against.

"We have to be sensitive to \$1 million already spent," Robinson said. "We have very detailed documents to support this."

In other action, council members unanimously approved giving the city's police chief, Howard Skerry, a \$30,000 annual raise, bringing his salary to more than \$200,000 from \$176,400, according to city data.

That's nearly \$50,000 more than Watsonville Police Chief Terry Medina earns. According to Watsonville records, Medina earns an annual salary of \$156,804.

According to Monterey city records, the police chief there makes \$163,920 each year.

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