

Proposed HOV lanes on Highway 1 wins key endorsement

Shanna McCord - Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ -- Carpool lanes to relieve congestion on Highway 1 would cut public buses' travel time from Santa Cruz to Watsonville by at least 30 minutes and likely increase bus ridership 40 percent, transportation leaders predict.

That was the thinking behind the Santa Cruz Metropolitan Transit District board's unanimous vote last week to support the proposed \$400 million high-occupancy vehicles lanes to run from Morrissey Boulevard in Santa Cruz past Aptos to Larkin Valley Road.

The board's vote was the first endorsement of the project by local transit officials since the HOV lanes were initially proposed by the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission several years ago.

Transportation officials say the endorsement could help sell the highway widening project to the broader community and gather political support.

"Zipping by cars is a strong way to encourage more people to use the buses," Metro board member and longtime Santa Cruz Councilman Mike Rotkin said. "It needs to be the right package, but there's little doubt that the transit district benefits from dependable service in Mid-County. Some kind of widening project makes sense."

The HOV lanes -- lanes dedicated to public transit and cars with at least one passenger -- are the last piece proposed in a string of projects to improve safety and congestion on Highway 1, the county's busiest and most vital corridor for commuters and tourists.

Building the \$50 million merge lanes from Pasatiempo on Highway 17 to the La Fonda overcrossing on Highway 1 recently wrapped up, and a \$22 million project to construct auxiliary lanes that connect the onramps and offramps between Soquel Avenue and Morrissey Boulevard is slated to begin in 2010.

Regional Transportation Commission officials say the HOV lanes project, the highest transportation priority in the county, was helped along by the Metro board's endorsement, said George Dondero, executive director of the Regional Transportation Commission.

"Their endorsement underscores the fact that if we do nothing, congestion will increase and the quality of transit service will go down and they'll lose riders," Dondero said. "People say they want more public transit, but we have to have a place to run it."

The average speed during peak afternoon southbound traffic will drop from 25 mph to about 12 mph by 2030 unless more capacity is added, Dondero said.

It currently takes about an hour and a half to ride the bus from Santa Cruz to Watsonville, a major difference from driving that probably prevents many from trying the bus, Metro board member and transportation Commissioner Marcela Tavantzis said.

"We want to make sure the Metro is a competitive choice in travel time, ease and comfort," Tavantzis said. "The HOV lanes are critical for the continued improvement of our transit system, and getting more cars off the road."

Still, many Santa Cruz County residents believe any widening of Highway 1, even for buses and carpools, does little to help global warming or encourage alternative transportation modes geared for pedestrians and bicyclists.

"As long as you keep widening, you just move the bottleneck farther down the road," Aptos resident and widening opponent Paul Elerick said. "I don't think HOV lanes are going to solve the problem. People are going to expect magic at rush hour, and that's not going to happen."

The Regional Transportation Commission has spent about \$8 million working on preliminary planning, designs and a draft environmental impact report for the HOV lanes.

The draft environmental report is due for public review in summer 2009, with the final report expected in 2010.

However, coming up the \$400 million to construct the HOV lanes is a stumbling block for the project.

State and federal funds aren't available for such a project, and local funding sources, such as a new tax, have not received communitywide support.

A \$600 million tax measure in 2004 to widen the highway and fund other transportation projects failed to win voters' two-thirds support, and a transportation funding task force that met regularly for more than a year failed to come up with a consensus for how to fund the county's transportation needs.

"The project won't go forward until it gets funded," Dondero said.

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