

OP-ED

Micah Posner: Highway 1 auxiliary lanes need proper review

While folks in Santa Cruz are focused on global and national issues, an outrageous abuse of state power is taking place right under our noses. With regard to a proposal to widen Highway 1 from Morrissey to Soquel with auxiliary lanes, Caltrans and our county's Regional Transportation Commission the SCCRTC have issued a draft environmental document that claims that widening the largest road in the county would have no impact on the environment.

Specifically, the introduction to their proposed Negative Declaration states that "the proposed project would have no effect on: agricultural resources, air quality, cultural resources, geology and soils, land use and planning, mineral resources, population and housing, or recreation." This flies in the face of common sense and is an insult to those of us who take carbon dioxide emissions seriously, including the city of Santa Cruz, which recently asked Caltrans to do a full environmental impact report of the project.

People Power is familiar with both sides of the debate around environmental impacts. A one-half mile bike path through the Arana Gulch that we support is opposed by some other environmentalists and is now in court. We never argued that the project would have no impact, nor did we try to stop an exhaustive EIR. We simply maintain that the benefits of the project far outweigh the impacts. This approach has, so far, drawn strong support for the project and we expect it ultimately to be built.

Unlike the half-mile bike path, the \$22 million freeway widening project comes with a spurious claim of no significant effect on the environment, including two schools and numerous adjacent neighborhoods. Nowhere in the dense stack of studies for this project does Caltrans admit that widening a road will draw more traffic. There is no attempt to quantify what that increase of traffic would be like over time, and no serious examination of environmentally superior alternatives to widening.

Many transportation experts believe that providing more lanes on highways will not significantly relieve congestion in the long term. While this is a debatable issue with many nuances, to suppose that building new lanes will not increase traffic at all is preposterous and irresponsible. Nor is it supported by any studies regarding either local or national freeway widening projects, including those commissioned by the SCCRTC in the past. Instead, Caltrans fantasizes that the exact same number of cars on the freeway will drive at more efficient speeds, thereby reducing the amount of smoke.

This attempt to sneak by the California Environmental Quality Act and the National Environmental Policy Act has larger implications than this particular project, and the same techniques are being used around the state for other roads. By ignoring a project's effect on induced traffic, Caltrans avoids complying with AB32 -- the state's commitment to reduce global warming gases. Because AB32 has yet to be fully implemented, they may be able to get away with this for the next few years, depending on whom you talk to, but it certainly runs contrary both to the intent of the law and the intent of our community.

We think that Santa Cruz County should be a leader in taking global warming seriously, not an entity that tries to sneak a project under the radar prior to state law taking effect. We should admit to an inherent contradiction when we want to widen roads and protect the Earth's climate at the same time,

then require transparent data and careful decision-making by our elected officials. Declaring that a large road widening project does not impact the environment prevents that from happening.

Whether you think that widening this stretch of highway is a good idea or not, we hope that you will join People Power, the Campaign for Sensible Transportation (www.sensibletransportation.org), and the city of Santa Cruz in asking the county's Regional Transportation Commission to do a full environmental impact report on this project, including science-based projections on induced traffic. We have until Friday -- a shamefully short 30-day window -- to communicate our concerns to Caltrans and the Regional Transportation Commission (www.sccrtc.org).

Micah Posner represents People Power of Santa Cruz County.