

## Commuters to get relief

### Connectors to Route 56 from I-5 and I-805 are about to open

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February 13, 2006

Motorists who endure the northbound Interstate 5/805 merge at the evening commute know a lot about waiting.

Just ask Michael Coleman, who works a mere seven miles from his Carmel Valley home but still spends up to a half hour getting there by way of the backed-up off-ramp onto state Route 56.

Or Frisco White, chairman of the Carmel Valley Community Planning Board, who rejoices in the rare days when he can simply miss the merge altogether by driving home from a different direction.

At long last, however, some of their waiting will be over.

As northbound commuters already have noticed from tantalizing new highway signs, four years of construction at the Sorrento Valley junction are nearly complete.

New connectors to Route 56 from I-5 and I-805 are within days of opening, part of a "local bypass" so unusual to San Diego County that it may be the first highway in the region that requires a user's guide.

Motorists will enter the bypass just before Genesee Avenue on I-5 and north of Mira Mesa Boulevard on I-805. The two approaches meld just north of Sorrento Valley Boulevard, carrying all northbound traffic headed for eastbound Route 56.

There's also a new off-ramp to eastbound Carmel Mountain Road and a two-lane bypass meant for trucks that want to escape the merge for awhile.

With thousands of vehicles removed from the existing lanes of the merge each day, even drivers heading straight through to North County ought to notice some reduction in congestion when the new lanes open.

Project manager Arturo Jacobo of the California Department of Transportation said the connector should offer a fairly free flow from the interstates to eastbound Route 56.

The merge will still be a big choke point for through traffic. But with a bypass, Jacobo said, "you



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Working on wiring for lights near the new Carmel Mountain Road offramp from Interstate 5 last week were Sergio Delgadillo and Carlos Guzman. Construction will be completed soon on a bypass to state Route 56 to ease traffic for northbound drivers.

eliminate a lot of the weaving, so you increase safety and make the system more efficient.”

Caltrans, still working on finishing touches, plans an on-site media event Friday. The opening for commuters isn't quite as firm, but Caltrans hopes to have it ready by the following Monday's commute.

The southbound lanes aren't scheduled for completion until the fall of 2007. When that's done, the reconfigured freeway will have 23 lanes at the widest point in the merge.

But drivers already are daring to calculate the time saved for the northbound commute.

White, who jokes about staying up late to be the first to drive a car onto the new connector, hopes to gain “anywhere from five to 10 minutes” going from downtown San Diego onto Route 56.

“I will be very, very thrilled when that opens up,” White said.

Coleman also expected to save five to 10 minutes, although he wonders whether the connector will “just fill up” like the regular lanes do.

The current exit to state Route 56 will be closed; an on-ramp from Carmel Mountain Road heading north will come in the spring.

As for the “local bypass,” the term used on the signs, that is intended mainly as an escape route for slow-moving trucks off I-5 or I-805. There are two outside lanes besides the two headed for Route 56; trucks would rejoin regular traffic just north of the merge. (Cars heading straight through to the I-5 corridor aren't supposed to use the bypass.)

For now, Caltrans isn't going to obligate trucks to use the bypass, as plans seemed to call for a few years ago. “We're going to let them decide at this point,” Caltrans spokesman Tom Nipper said.

Traffic counts on the corridor may help determine whether it still makes sense to steer all trucks onto the bypass, Jacobo said.

The northbound half of the \$186 million project, once promised for the end of 2005, ran a little late, partly because of last winter's heavy rain.

Now it's down to finishing touches: some electrical work and K-rail barriers, sometimes called Jersey barriers, to complete the separation of the old and new lanes.

And drivers will see the answer to one of the most frequently asked questions about the project – the purpose of the oddly topped, 60-foot poles lining the new lanes.

They're high-tech lights (with lightning arrestors and red warning signals for low-flying aircraft), powerful enough to illuminate the entire northbound half of the merge.

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