

COMMENTARY

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THE MERGE

Missed Connections

By Ian S. Port

Monday, Dec. 10, 2007 | November wasn't a good month for a number of San Diegans who own homes in Del Mar Heights.

At a meeting with Caltrans and city of San Diego officials, residents of Portofino Drive and Portofino Circle learned that their west-of-I-5 homes could be acquired and destroyed to make room for a massive ramp connecting lanes on I-5 south with SR-56 east.

The Portofino neighborhood could also be totally left alone -- if traffic studies show that beefing up the city streets that now connect the freeways would acceptably handle projected 2030 traffic levels. Or if the costs and benefits of razing homes and building a two-lane flyover simply don't pencil out.

The pesky gap between the freeways in two directions isn't merely an annoyance to commuters. It's become the centerpiece of a major battle in Merge-land between residents on either side of I-5.

If a connector from I-5 south to SR-56 gets built, as officials are considering, it will likely wipe out a huge chunk of the Portofino neighborhood.

If a connector between SR-56 west and I-5 north doesn't get built, Carmel Valley will continue to see freeway traffic slog through its heart indefinitely.

But how did we get to these two poor choices? How did San Diego get a vital freeway only half-connected at one end? And is this really the best freeway planning we can do?

First, the official answer to why SR-56 lacks two direct connectors: "The volumes did not warrant the expenditure and impact of direct connectors," said Allan Kosup, Caltrans' I-5 corridor director.

Leaders at the city of San Diego and Caltrans -- who made the decision to omit connectors in the 1980's -- saw traffic-producing homes and businesses only on the west and east ends of the proposed SR-56 route. The middle area, now eastern Carmel Valley, was treated by traffic engineers like open space because the city was not at that time allowing development on it.

At least not until 1998, when city voters passed Proposition M, opening up the Future Urbanizing Area, as it was known, to development. Kosup insists that move couldn't have been foreseen.

"You can't really assume anything," he told me. "How do you know if the voters are going to approve it?"

It might be bad policy to bet millions on the future development of a "future urbanizing area," or it might not -- but how could one seriously argue that the only east-west route linking I-15 and I-5 between La Jolla and Oceanside would somehow not need all the traffic handling help it could get?

Easy. Caltrans and the city could claim that the connectors wouldn't be immediately necessary because, at least according to the Environmental Impact Reports for the first two sections of SR-56, "those two segments will not connect."

Yes, you read that correctly. From the 56 West EIR:

"Caltrans, the City of San Diego, or private developers may, in the future, construct a freeway or city street which will provide a direct connection from I-5 to I-15. ... This is not a project at this time, or in the near future.

By separating the 56 environmental reviews into three parts -- west, middle and end -- the project's designers did not have to contend with the reality that SR-56 would be a vital link for San Diego County. The need for connectors wouldn't have been clear because the scope of the project was limited to a less than two-mile section of freeway leading merely to some new houses in Carmel Valley.

Of course the plan, since SR-56 was first envisioned in 1959, was always for it to connect the major north-south freeways through San Diego County.

In July 1990, months after it approved an EIR saying that SR-56 wouldn't connect I-5 to I-15, the city of San Diego signed a memorandum of understanding with Caltrans that said Caltrans would "provide and construct freeway connectors to and from the north and the junction of I-5 and SR-56 *within three years after completion of the possible future connection of SR-56 through the future urbanizing area to I-15.*"

SR-56 was finished between I-5 and I-15 in 2004, which, by my count, means Caltrans is about to be a year late on delivering connectors ... though the agreement is of course subject to financial restrictions. Also, notice the strategic placement of the word "possible," just before that all-important "connection."

So why did Caltrans and the city split the environmental reviews? Why did they pretend that the 56 wouldn't connect I-15 with I-5 and thus argue that direct connectors weren't necessary?

Money.

Officials were drooling over the possibility of getting millions in matching (and needed) state funds for the SR-56 project. Because of a quiet 1987 political deal, none of those state funds could pay for the section of the freeway that ran through the Future Urbanizing Area -- which was the most controversial section anyway. So the planners had an idea. From a December 1987 Caltrans memo:

"Jack [Grasberger, Caltrans' Chief Deputy District Director] requested we find a way to deliver a sales project on part of 56, faster than if we waited for an EIS [Environmental Impact Statement] on entire link, I-5 to I-15. I suggested an early N.D. [negative declaration] on each end, then an EIS in the white area (future urbanizing)."

Caltrans and the City could get state-level environmental approvals for the ends of the 56 and then use the additional funds to build them. The middle segment, which would require lengthy federal approvals, could be dealt with later. The same 1987 memo further lays out this strategy:

1. The N.D. projects would terminate some distance from the white [future urbanizing] area, avoiding a point-the-gun affect.
2. They would stand on their own merits, serving existing development as a now need and would not require the larger EIS project in order to be justified.
3. They are constrained by existing development, and alternative alignment studies would not be required.
4. The east project has less environmental issues, and would help Penasquitos to I-15 freeway access, a major political goal.

It wasn't the easiest strategy to follow. The 56 West EIR was rejected by the city Planning Commission and the staff of the California Coastal Commission, which both pointed to insufficient study of alternative alignment studies and undue environmental impacts.

But the City Council and the Coastal Commission approved the documents, more state funding was received for the ends of SR-56, and the "stubs" were built separately, with separate environmental reviews. San Diego got two distinct, short freeways that curiously wore the same badge.

I must point out here that all the Caltrans officials I've spoken with say that the decision to omit full direct connectors from the SR-56 project was based on traffic projections showing that they weren't immediately necessary. Not, as interviews and document reviews have led me to believe, because the whole 56 project was segmented into less-objectionable and easier-to-fund components.

"Even now I don't know that it's a slam-dunk that those connectors would be constructed," Kosup said. "It's marginal now, so it doesn't surprise me that it wasn't justified back then."

But asked if those traffic projections were made on the full, I-5 to I-15 version of SR-56 or the 1.8-mile version described in the 56 West EIR, Kosup said he didn't know.

"I would think that they were looking at the entire route, just without the land use in the middle," he said.

Carmel Valley residents who spent years attending SR-56 planning meetings remember the answer differently.

"At first the argument was, 'Oh no, this project stands alone,'" remembers Mindy Scarano, a land-use attorney and Carmel Valley resident who fought for better planning of the SR-56 project.

"When they finally were talking about the project as a whole, there was still a position that, looking at traffic flow, that a direct connector wasn't required. All these arguments -- the traffic is going to back up in Carmel Valley, the traffic is going to flow through Carmel Valley because people aren't going to want to sit in that back up getting to El Camino Real ... All of these things fell on deaf ears."

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