

Freeway's economic impact wide open

By TIM COFFEY, The Daily Transcript

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Last month, government officials, business leaders, local residents, a ribbon, and a pair of scissors were on hand to celebrate the completion of state Route 56.

They inaugurated a nine-mile, four-lane freeway connecting inland residential communities with coastal getaways and employment hubs. SR 56 is expected to carry 120,000 vehicles daily by 2020. Some economic impacts of the freeway have already been felt -- such as a rise in construction employment. Many others are expected -- such as shorter employee commutes, less wear on alternative roadways, and better access to coastal and inland businesses.

"This was eagerly anticipated and we're all very excited about this," said Toni Kraft, president and chief executive of the Poway Chamber of Commerce. Although preliminary, the Poway, Rancho Bernardo and Diamond Gateway chambers of commerce, as well as the North County Chambers of Commerce Association, are discussing a joint promotion of inland North County because of the freeway, Kraft said. Yet, officials at the west end of the freeway are more skeptical about its impact. Most fear it will add to coastal congestion that typically reaches a peak during the summer.

SR 56 directly links the near coastal Carmel Valley with inland Rancho Penasquitos, alleviating traffic from Interstate 15 and surface streets through some residential communities. It is the only east-west freeway in a 25-mile gap between state Routes 52 and 78 in North San Diego County. SR 56 has been in the works for six years -- San Diego's city council approved the plan in 1998 and the official groundbreaking was in 1999. It cost \$220 million to build.

The freeway's first economic impact was immediate, said Marney Cox, chief economist for the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG), which contributed \$13.1 million to construction through the TransNet sales tax.

Public sector building projects buoyed construction employment, estimating that 2,600 jobs were created per \$100 million in funding, he added.

Construction industry employment numbers over the last several years "have been fairly strong and part of that is how much construction the public sector has been doing," Cox said. "Part of that is transportation." The next impact is expected soon. SR 56 will enable commuters to spend less time in their cars. Cox estimated that 30 percent to 40 percent of San Diego employees work in the Sorrento Valley-

University Towne Center area, a few miles south from where SR 56 joins Interstate 5. The new freeway also provides truckers from inland warehouses an easier access to I-5, the primary transportation corridor along the West Coast. "Being able to get on a freeway as opposed to having to use a major thorough-fair with stop lights will take up less time getting to and from freeways," Cox said.

Kraft hopes SR 56 brings in more than just returning commuters. The freeway, she said, offers greater access to inland shops, restaurants and other small businesses.

"We certainly hope so," Kraft said. "The chambers ... will be doing our best to make sure that they find their way into our wonderful cities as well as finding opportunities for shopping and dining."

The three North County chambers, including the NCCCA, regularly work together "on issues that affect us all," Kraft said, and they are talking again on how to promote inland businesses with the opening of SR 56. "It's in the infancy stages, but it's certainly been on everyone's mind at the chamber level," she said.

The freeway "somewhat scratches the surface, but it's moving in the right direction," Kraft added. "Of course it's moving traffic toward Poway." It's also letting out at the coast. Business and government leaders in Del Mar are unsure, if not slightly pessimistic, on the freeway's impact.

They see more congestion that could influence potential visitors to steer clear or a greater disbursement of visitors among all coastal cities, said Walt Beerle, president of the Del Mar Village Association.

"Having (SR 56) open, there is going to be more traffic, but then again what that will do to the village of Del Mar remains to be seen," he said. "Are people actually coming to Del Mar because of that, or are they just going to I-5 and scattering north and south? My own personal opinion is I think we're just going to have wait and see."