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## Councilman's Corner

# SR56 update

By Scott Peters, District One San Diego City Councilman

Last year we opened the SR56, a freeway that had been planned for 20 years, but one that had never been built. The 56 provides a critical east-west link between the inland communities and the coast but as many of you know, at the time of the original SR56 design, Caltrans asserted that traffic projections



showed no need for direct connectors to the I-5. Many of us noted

## Commentary

that the effect of not having direct connector ramps would likely be cars leaving SR56 to roam through Carmel Valley neighborhood streets to get to I-5 from Del Mar Heights Road or even Via de la Valle, and we have fought to see those connections made.

While we pursue the direct connections, we have created an interim plan to decrease traffic from 56-west to I-5 north and south in the near term. The project will improve traffic flow from SR56 west to I-5 north and north and south on El Camino Real.

First, we will convert one existing right-turn lane on Carmel Valley Road to a shared through right turn lane on El Camino Real, creating three southbound lanes. This will feed into the second improvement, underneath the 56 on southbound El Camino Real.

The second project will take away one through lane by providing an additional left turn lane onto east-bound 56. These improvements will be crucial in helping the southbound traffic flow on El Camino Real in the morning, and will be completed through re-striping of the roads.

A third improvement will address the backup on the west-bound off ramp from SR56 to Carmel Valley Road by widening the off ramp. An additional through lane and an additional left turn lane will be added to improve traffic flow. All of these improvements will start construction this month.

At the same time that we move forward with these interim improvements, we continue to work on the development of the connector ramps to I-5. Proposition M, the 1998 ballot proposition that allowed development in the 56-corridor, specifically calls for direct connectors to I-5 both north and south. I believe that the 56-west to I-5 north ramp is absolutely necessary to relieve the current traffic situation and to protect Carmel Valley neighborhoods. However, many residents have expressed concern about a proposal to build a 70-foot high connector ramp from the I-5 south to 56-east. I share these concerns and believe that we should explore an alternative, more environmentally sensitive configuration for this ramp that meets the requirements of Proposition M.

Funding remains the most difficult hurdle. The transportation bill recently passed by the U.S. House of Representatives includes \$6 million for the connector project. Congressman Randy Cunningham worked diligently to get this funding and we appreciate his help.

SANDAG, which is responsible for regional transportation funding, has ranked the SR56 connector ramps first and third in its freeway-to-free-way connector study, which ranks funding priority for missing freeway connectors in San Diego County. That puts us in a decent position to compete for scarce highway funds that become available.

As I have noted in the past, I wish that the 56 had been planned and constructed with direct connectors. However, I have made it my top priority for my second term to move forward with the completion of this project. In the interim I continue to urge Caltrans to remove the meter at the end of the 56-west ramp. Caltrans has not been receptive, but has indicated that it will revisit the issue in a year when the I-5 widening project is nearing completion.

The completion of the Carmel Mountain Road interchange and I-5 / I-805 expansion projects in 2006 and 2007 should also alleviate some of the traffic that currently exists at the intersection of these freeways. In the coming months I hope to convene elected officials and other interests to monitor timelines and push for the early completion of these vital connectors. I look forward to working with you and your community on this important project.