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Councilman's Corner

SR56 connector update

By Scott Peters, District One City Councilman

As most of you know, the state budget situation is not pretty. The budget deficit projections for the 2004 fiscal year range from \$26 billion to \$36 billion. Whatever the actual number, there are difficult



decisions on the horizon that will affect virtually every aspect of state and local services. One of the major impacts will be to transportation projects. Still, there is

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some good news on highway projects near Carmel Valley, and I wanted to provide an update.

Through the mayor's Freeway Congestion Strike Team, we have been pressing Sacramento to keep funded and on schedule those projects already under construction, so that we can continue to make gains on increasing mobility for the region. So far, the I-5 / I-805 merge widening project is still on schedule for completion in 2007, and SR56 is still on track to open in July 2004.

For Carmel Valley, it's most important that SR56 be built in its entirety, with northbound connectors to I-5. Thanks to Congressman Duke Cunningham, we've been able to keep this effort on track as well. Congressman Cun-

ningham provided a tremendous service by putting forward a \$1.5 million appropriation to fund the preliminary engineering work necessary to move important telecommunications lines along I-5 that stand in the way of completion of the northbound connector.

As many of you know, at the time of the original SR56 design, Caltrans asserted that traffic projections showed no need for direct connectors. However, 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. So as the city started pushing for the completion of 56, we've pushed Caltrans to build the whole freeway, including the ramps. As I have reported to you in past columns, the city assembled a "value analysis" team last year to identify any viable, lower cost alternative to CalTrans' \$137 million option that would meet the project's needs, purpose and functional requirements. The team included community members, City, CalTrans, and SANDAG staff, and met for 10 months. Their report recommended initiating the required environmental review for making the direct connections in three phases. Phase I would be operational improvements on I-5 and SR 56 from widening off and on ramps where feasible. Phase II would construct the proposed westbound SR 56 to northbound I-5 connector and add auxiliary lanes on I-5 from Carmel Valley Road to Del Mar Heights Road. Finally, Phase III

would construct the proposed southbound I-5 to eastbound SR 56 connector.

The city has begun the environmental review required for this project, which will take two to three years, since it involves extensive analysis and the ultimate agreement of the state and federal governments. One of the main hurdles to building the auxiliary lanes on I-5 that are part of Phase II are the main telecommunication cables for San Diego County, now buried adjacent to the east side of the I-5 freeway. They would have to be moved before auxiliary lanes could be constructed. These lines serve hundreds of thousands of customers and moving them will not be easy or inexpensive. It has been estimated that moving these lines could cost anywhere from \$10 to \$20 million, and Congressman Cunningham's assistance will help us to nail down that number and start the engineering work that will inform how the project moves forward.

I wish that SR 56 had been originally planned and approved with the connectors that will make it a complete highway. The SR56 Steering Committee made up of city staff, the community and my office meet regularly to continue to make sure that these freeway improvements are done as soon as possible. Although the state is facing unprecedented budget troubles, our projects are still moving forward, and we are getting much needed assistance from our federal representatives. Thanks again to Congressman Cunningham, the value analysis team and city staff for all their hard work on this project. I look forward to bringing you more updates in the future.