

Councilman's Corner

Funding the SR56 connectors

By Scott Peters, District One City Councilman

Early in 2001, Mayor Murphy created the Freeway Congestion Strike Team, bringing together officials and engineers from the city, county, CalTrans, San Diego Association of Governments



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(“SANDAG”) and other agencies to work toward solving the traffic congestion problems that affect so many San Diegans every day. A major priority for the Strike Team, of which I am a member, is to keep the construction of State Route 56 on schedule

Commentary

for opening in July 2004.

This critical east-west linkage is long overdue. Unfortunately, it's clear that the improvement will also result in a particular burden on Carmel Valley residents because of CalTrans' refusal to include northern connector ramps to the I-5 freeway. At the time of the original SR56 design, CalTrans stated that its traffic projections showed no need for these 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 when the city started pushing for the completion of 56, I pushed the city to get CalTrans to build the whole freeway, including the ramps. As a result, the Freeway Congestion Strike Team has made it a priority of the San Diego region to find the funding necessary to build the missing freeway connectors on SR 56 and I-5.

In December, 2000, CalTrans issued a "Project Study Report" that defined the potential connections for State Route 56 with I-5; one from southbound I-5 to eastbound SR 56 and the other from westbound SR 56 to northbound I-5. The \$137 million price tag was staggering, so the city assembled a "value analysis" team to identify

any viable, lower cost alternatives 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 connections in three phases. By the end of this process CalTrans admitted that its updated traffic projections showed that the northbound connectors were needed and also conceded that a phased plan would be acceptable to them.

Conceptually the phasing could be as follows. Phase I would improve city streets by adding turn lanes and implementing signal timing and coordination, and improve operations on eastbound Carmel Valley road to permit an improved flow of southbound to eastbound traffic. Phase I would also include operational improvements on I-5 and SR 56 by 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 when appropriate. The team appreciated that the construction could take place in stages, but they wanted the planning and environmental review for this project to be comprehensive.

Unfortunately, it was clear to me and to the value analysis team that these improvements were not high priorities to CalTrans, and that CalTrans would not provide any momentum or leadership for them.

After gaining the support of the Torrey Pines, Carmel Valley, Torrey Hills and Del Mar Mesa planning boards, we decided to make the city, not CalTrans, the lead governmental agency for putting together the environmental analysis and the rest of the project. The Freeway Congestion Strike Team endorsed this approach earlier this year, and an environmental review will be underway soon. Additionally, our local planning boards have agreed to continue to support our implementation efforts, and we appreciate their help.

Funding remains the most difficult hurdle. Following on the efforts of the Freeway Congestion Strike Team, SANDAG, which is responsible for regional transportation funding, has ranked the SR56 connector ramps first and third in its freeway to freeway 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. Our efforts may also get a big boost if Proposition 51 passes on the November ballot. Proposition 51 will establish a new transportation trust fund from money from the existing sales tax on motor vehicles. The measure specifically calls out \$137 million for the SR56 connector ramps.

I wish that SR 56 had not been planned and approved without the connectors that will make it a complete highway. However, city staff, the community and my office are all working diligently to get these freeway improvements done as soon as possible. I thank all those who have lent their expertise to the value analysis study and who are working hard on implementation.

On a different note, on September 30 I was pleased to celebrate the removal of the first utility pole in the Del Mar Terrace undergrounding program. The beginning of the project marks the end of a long journey which began in 1995 when residents began a movement to underground unsightly utility lines that blocked views of Torrey Pines State Beach and the Los Penasquitos Lagoon. After finding that the neighborhoods in their area did not meet standards for state undergrounding money, the residents worked with the city to create a self-assessment district to complete the undergrounding work. When I came into office two years ago I began working with city staff, community members and the utility companies to keep the project on schedule. Kudos go out to Terrace residents Nancy Maricovich, Wayne Dunlap, Maura and Bob Harvey, Kelly Coleman, and Christina Dworsky for their perseverance and hard work on this very important project.