

Connectors to link SR-56 and I-5 still a long way off

By Terry Wells

When city and state officials celebrate the completion of the "missing link" on state Route 56 on July 17, they'll toast the addition of a dramatic new east-west connection between inland North County and the coast.

Six years in the planning and construction, at a cost of \$220 million, the five-mile link connecting Carmel Valley to Rancho Penasquitos is expected to bring a dramatic shift in traffic patterns, and to ease congestion on local highways and freeways.

But the SR-56 project's completion also highlights another missing link - freeway connectors between SR-56 and Interstate 5 - that remains to be addressed in the years ahead. Currently, motorists must leave the freeway and use surface streets if they want to go from southbound Interstate 5 to eastbound SR-56. They must also leave the freeway to go from westbound SR-56 to northbound I-5. The ramps, or surface street alternatives to ramps, haven't been forgotten.

But planning is only at the earliest of stages today, according to officials who spoke at a June 10 gathering of a steering committee that will work on the Interstate 5/State Route 56 Freeway Connectors Project.

"This is going to be a long process," said Linda Smith, a project manager with URS Corp., the traffic consulting firm hired to work on alternatives for the project. "We're going to be here for a long time developing alternatives that are worthy of looking at."

The committee includes representatives from four city planning boards whose areas will be affected, namely Carmel Valley, Torrey Hills, Torrey Pines and Del Mar Mesa. Other members include engineers from the city of San Diego, the lead agency in the project; and advisors from Caltrans and the San Diego Association of Governments.

Committee members from the four planning boards said they appreciated the opportunity to be involved in the project from the beginning. But some added that they already have developed concerns about the direction of the project.

Among the concerns identified at the meeting were:

The flyovers. Caltrans officials say that physical constraints make it likely that the only way to shunt southbound traffic from I-5 to eastbound SR-56 is to build an overpass, or "flyover" in Caltrans parlance, that would cross the I-5 corridor and connect with eastbound SR-56.

The purpose is one that most residents say they support - keeping commuters from driving off the freeway and wandering into local communities in the Carmel Valley area in an effort to avoid congestion on the freeway. But there may be opposition to the airborne roadways proposed to meet that lofty goal.

The southbound I-5 to westbound SR-56 flyover could be as high as 70 feet above the ground before it swoops down to the valley floor and hooks up with SR-56 to the east of El Camino Real, a possibility that creates potential noise and visual impacts both for residents in the area, as well as nearby Penasquitos Lagoon.

One woman, who declined to be identified, called the big flyover an "abomination that nobody on the west side of I-5 wants to see," while a Torrey Pines resident compared it to the tangle of freeway ramps in Mission Valley that straddles a number of local businesses there.

Officials said a second, smaller flyover would be necessary if a ramp is built taking westbound traffic off SR-56 and routing it to northbound I-5.

Doug Lappi, president of the nonprofit Torrey Pines Association, which raises funds to benefit the Torrey Pines State Reserve, said his group has not yet taken a position on the proposed improvements. But Lappi added that the flyovers seem to pose a problem for the nearby lagoon.

"The city has spent a lot of money over the years keeping a wildlife corridor open out to the lagoon," Lappi said. "This flyover would go right over that corridor, and we look at that as being a problem."

The metered ramp. Among the plans outlined for changing traffic patterns that will result from the opening of a new east-west artery was the possibility of putting a meter, or traffic light, on the ramp that now carries westbound motorists from SR-56 to I-5 south.

"If you meter that ramp, people will cut through the community," said Paula Abney, a Torrey Hills planner, adding that the ramp is already backing up to El Camino Real at peak travel times now without a meter.

That question is a sensitive one, given the fact that the steering committee's stated overall goal is to improve traffic flow from one freeway to the other "while discouraging regional traffic from diverting onto local streets."

Arturo Jacobo, the Caltrans project manager, noted that massive improvements are under way and planned for improving traffic capacity on the I-5 corridor from the merge with Interstate 805 north to Via de la Valle. But in the short term, while those improvements are still being constructed, metering may be necessary, he said.

"You have to look out until I-5 is improved, and then you can look at changing the meter rates," Jacobo said. "Interstate 5 is one of the main freeways in all of San Diego County, and we need to make sure it keeps moving."

Public Transportation, or the lack thereof. Several speakers at the meeting noted that plans for the area have long talked about emphasizing public transit as part of the solution to traffic congestion on local freeways. But the conceptual plans now under discussion don't seem to include transit at all, they said.

"What do we see? Not only isn't there any buses, but in the last couple of years even the school buses have not operated," said Lou Adamo. "All this stuff (about public transit) gets put out when it's time to get elected, or make money. But when the rubber hits the road, that's all we hear is rubber and road."

Officials noted that plans are under discussion for what is known as "bus rapid transit," a sort of express service that would utilize dedicated freeway lanes that are now on the drawing board. The city is also considering the creation of one or more park-and-ride facilities to encourage the use of such buses.

The bus rapid transit approach, a transit mode that has found a determined advocate in 1st District Councilman Scott Peters during the last two years, would be designed to cut down the commute times required by traditional city buses.

But officials agreed that innovations in transit are still only in the design phase, and the region will continue to rely in the short term on freeways that grow more congested each year as the county's population increases.

The team of agencies that will plan the project is now in the process of gathering new traffic counts for I-5 and SR-56, as well as the streets that now serve them, including Carmel Valley Road, El Camino Real, and Del Mar Heights Road. (For more information, see a city-sponsored Web site that provides details on the plan at www.sannet.gov/5_56freewayconnectors/index.shtml.)

City officials will hold a "scoping" session this fall to set some parameters for what types of alternatives they will study in the next year or two. From there, officials will analyze alternatives using computer traffic models that will be refined by various types of traffic counts, in addition to preparing the environmental impact report.

Committee members said the scoping meeting will be crucial because it is important to get suggestions to the consultants early in the process.

The alternatives under consideration include the full-scale flyovers and a series of other improvements to existing ramps. Those improvements include realignments at the northbound entrance ramp and southbound exit ramp from I-5 at Carmel Valley Road; the eastbound entrance ramp to SR-56 from El Camino Real; and all ramps at the Del Mar Heights road interchange, according to the city's project outline.

A second approach would reconfigure the existing streets in the area to serve the freeways without building any new ramps. Those improvements could include the addition of auxiliary lanes on I-5 between Carmel Valley Road and Del Mar Heights Road, and modifications to the interchange at El Camino Real and SR-56 to improve its level of service, the city report said. The proposed El Camino/56 improvements include widening the westbound exit ramp as well as work on El Camino Real itself to improve traffic flow.

A third alternative, required in all EIR's, is the "no project" alternative, meaning that conditions would remain largely as they are today. Depending on the approach that is taken, officials estimate that the freeway connectors project could cost from \$21 million to \$137 million.

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