

North County Times

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Highway 56 opening to mixed reviews

By: KATHERINE MARKS - Staff Writer

When a new section of Highway 56 opens to drivers next month, a 20-year saga will come to an end.

Well, almost.

Even after what some call the missing link ---- the long-delayed middle section of the 10-mile road linking Interstates 5 and 15 ----- is completed, the road itself will still be missing some vital parts. Ramps linking Highway 56 to northbound I-5 are still years away, as are ramps that link southbound I-5 to eastbound 56.

The long-awaited highway is a welcome addition to the county for many along Interstate 15, who will have a new freeway route to the coast. The last east-west highway ---- Highway 78 ---- was built three decades ago. The newly finished Highway 56 will be the only major east-west highway north of Highway 52 and south of Highway 78, a distance of 25 miles.

The highway will be "a boon for midcounty residents," Poway Councilman Bob Emery said last week. "It gives us a direct link to the coast."

But the completion of the highway is dreaded by some coastal residents.

Many coastal residents worry that Highway 56 will create more traffic nightmares than it will solve. The lack of two connecting ramps will force drivers onto Carmel Valley Road, El Camino Real and other surface streets to get from I-5 to Highway 56. With the freeway completed, they expect the surrounding roads to be heavily taxed by a crush of new traffic.

"We have concerns," said Torrey Pines Community Planning Board member Don Billings, who lives in Del Mar. Foremost among those concerns is that traffic will cut through the Torrey Pines area to get to northbound I-5, he said. He worries that Carmel Valley Road, on the west end of Highway 56, will become one giant bottleneck for cars trying to get from the highway to I-5.

Billings also draws comparisons between the effects Highway 52 had on La Jolla and the traffic he worries that Highway 56 will bring to Del Mar.

"Del Mar, since it incorporated 45 years ago, has successfully managed to restrict access into the community by making sure its roads are not mistaken for freeways," Billings said.

Carmel Valley residents are "shaking in their boots," in anticipation of the traffic, said Lisa Ross, a Del Mar Heights resident and former chairwoman of the State Route 56 Task Force. "They'll be sitting down there waiting to see what happens and if all the dire predictions will come true."

The group lobbied for state funding for the highway and insisted that the ramps were a critical piece of the package.

But when the California Department of Transportation reviewed traffic patterns, it found that most of the traffic was headed south. Money was scarce. So the connector ramps that normally would have been included in the first phase of the project were left out, said Gary Gallegos, executive director of the San Diego Association of Governments.

The environmental review of the two remaining ramps began last year and should wrap up by 2008, said Arturo Jacobo, a project manager for Caltrans. Construction on the ramps should be completed by around 2010 and cost \$150 million, he said.

Until the ramps are built, drivers headed west on Highway 56 who want to go north on Interstate 5 must exit the highway at El Camino Real and use Carmel Valley Road to reach the interstate, Jacobo said.

Those who want to reach eastbound Highway 56 from southbound Interstate 5 will have to use Carmel Valley Road exit and enter the highway from El Camino Real, he said.

Local streets are being upgraded to handle the influx of traffic, Jacobo said. The offramp at El Camino Real is being widened by one lane. A new lane will be added on eastbound Carmel Valley Road near El Camino Real. And El Camino Real will be widened at Highway 56, Jacobo said.

Those projects are slated to start this fall and be finished by early next year.

"It was shortsighted and everyone now is paying the price," Supervisor Pam Slater-Price said of the exclusion of the connector ramps. "If it had been planned by Caltrans initially, it just would've been a normal expense."

"I don't want to diminish the fact it's finally coming to fruition," Slater-Price said. "It's a red letter day in that (the highway is) finally getting done. It's taken us many, many years."

The long-awaited missing link of the highway, a new 4.5-mile stretch from Camino del Sur and Carmel Country Road, will open to drivers July 19. It will feature interchanges at Camino Santa Fe and Camino del Sur, said Gustavo Dallarda, a project manager for Caltrans. A loop ramp is also being added at the interchange from eastbound 56 to northbound 15, which now requires drivers to make a left-hand turn.

The highway, which cuts through a rapidly developing swath of new homes and commercial businesses, is expected to reduce traffic on Black Mountain Road, Mira Mesa Boulevard, Miramar Road, Carmel Valley Road and Del Dios Highway, Dallarda said.

Rancho Santa Fe resident Al Frowiss, a retiree who has sat on a number of transportation task forces and planning boards, said he doesn't expect Highway 56 to ease traffic dramatically on Del Dios Highway. The road is a winding, two-lane shortcut used by thousands of commuters headed to the coast through the Del Dios Mountains, past Lake Hodges, and is the principal inland, or backcountry route from Escondido. Frowiss said he thinks a road that bypasses Rancho Santa Fe - --- like the controversial Highway 680 scrapped in the 1990s ---- is still needed.

The four-lane Highway 56 is expected to carry between 20,000 and 40,000 vehicles per day initially and between 84,000 and 120,000 vehicles per day by the year 2020. Plans call for eventually adding two more lanes, but those plans hinge on the passage of the 40-year TransNet

sales tax extension that goes before voters in November. The tax extension includes \$99 million for those lanes. Voters have paid the half-penny sales tax since 1988, and it is set to expire March 31, 2008.

The new portion of the freeway cost \$56 million and the entire state route cost \$220 million, Dallarda said. The city of San Diego contributed \$49 million to the project.

The rest of the funding came from the county, the existing half-cent county sales tax, the state and other local sources.

"It took a massive effort to fund this thing," Ross said. "Because you had so many jurisdictions involved, it was a sight to behold."

Poway's Emery and others said the highway is overdue.

Supervisor Slater-Price recalled last week that when she ran successfully for a seat on the Board of Supervisors in 1992, the road had "been put on permanent hold."

"The I-15 corridor wanted it. People in Del Mar and the I-5 corridor didn't," Slater-Price said.

After the Board of Supervisors in 1994 abandoned plans to build the controversial Highway 680 through Rancho Santa Fe and Encinitas, Slater-Price was instrumental in convincing the board to transfer about \$20 million set aside for that road to Highway 56.

In 1999, the first phase of construction on Highway 56 began.

SANDAG's Gallegos said Highway 56 was easy to build, once construction started. But getting to that point was the hard part, he said.

"It's been on the books for at least 20 years," Gallegos said.

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