

## **Route 56 opening a time for celebration, more planning**

By SCOTT LEWIS, The Daily Transcript

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Local officials remember the potholes that came up on the way to a completed state Route 56 and they're already making plans to repair new ones.

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San Diego Mayor Dick Murphy remembers sitting on the board of directors of the San Diego Association of Government last year while the agency actually wondered if it should loan the state money to keep it from cutting off funds to the construction of state Route 56.

The state fixed things before San Diego officials were forced to do it, but the episode illustrated what seemed to be SR 56's story: never quite dead, but never quite done. Saturday, that story will be officially over.

Or will it?

The \$220 million freeway opens for bicycle riders hoping for a novelty ride this Saturday and to regular vehicle traffic Monday.

But local politicians are already planning improvements to the road before it has had a chance to anger drivers.

County Supervisor Pam Slater-Price said the ceremonious opening of the freeway will make Saturday a "red-letter day."

"It's a good day, it really is," she said. "But it will probably not be quite as wonderful as the people on the east side of the county believe it's going to be."

And there's a pretty simple reason why. State planners, "don't really predict future growth well," she said.

They never imagined anyone would actually want to head west on SR 56 and then turn north on Interstate 5. So there's no such connection available.

The connection to I-5 north could cost up to \$150 million coupled with potentially six more years of work.

"[San Diego City Councilman] Scott Peters and I believe we can't wait that long," Slater-Price said Thursday. "We're missing critical links." Slater-Price said that she's been working on SR 56 since she first won a seat on the County Board of Supervisors in 1992. And, like most other politicians who've worked on the project, she remembers many moments when the highway looked like it wasn't going to happen.

The state, Sandag, the county and the city played major roles in funding the construction. Murphy and Slater-Price said their respective governments' contributions to the project were "unprecedented."

In 1995, Slater-Price and County Supervisor Ron Roberts persuaded their colleagues to redirect \$20 million in discretionary funds from the failed plans for a Route 680 to SR 56 instead.

And Murphy highlighted the city of San Diego's own contribution of about 25 percent of the total construction costs of the crucial middle segment of the route.

Murphy said that after he was elected in 2000, he immediately convened a "Freeway Congestion Strike Team" -- including representatives of the city, Slater-Price, and other state and regional officials.

"This freeway had been on the drawing boards for almost 40 years, it was time to get it done," Murphy said. In the process of doing so, Murphy said he learned a valuable lesson about completing ambitious infrastructure initiatives.

"The secret to getting public works projects done on schedule is constant vigilance," he said. "You can't insist on everything being done on time, but you can ensure that a few critical projects are completed if you focus on them."

Roberts, who is hoping to defeat Murphy in the November mayoral election, said many officials worked diligently to make sure the project got through its most difficult times.

"Sometimes, the people who do the heavy lifting aren't in office when these large capital projects get completed," Roberts said. "And there are a lot of people on the scene today who get credit who weren't there before."

The nine-mile stretch, whose completion officials are celebrating Saturday, will accommodate an estimated 65,000 vehicles per day. That total should increase to between 84,000 and 120,000 vehicles a day by 2020.

"Completing a freeway promotes both economic prosperity and protects our quality of life," Murphy said.

"The growth is already there. We need to attempt to accommodate the traffic that already exists."

"When you look at that area of the county, it would be an incomplete picture without state Route 56," Roberts said.

"We realized it was something vital to the region so we did everything we could to support it." Plans already are in place to also add two lanes to the highway.