
THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

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Plans for Mid-County Parkway may be cut in half

By DUG BEGLEY

Citing environmental concerns, opposition from residents and more pressing priorities, the Riverside County Transportation Commission's staff is proposing to scale back by half the 32-mile, \$3 billion Mid-County Parkway.

Rather than connecting San Jacinto and Corona, the shorter route will go no farther than San Jacinto-to-Interstate 215.

"We're cutting it in half," said Cathy Bechtel, project development director for the transportation commission. "We're not saying the traffic demand has gone away, we're just saying at this time we don't think we can go ahead with the full plan."

The shorter, 16-mile project will also cost about half the original, \$1.6 billion, Bechtel said, still making the parkway a massive undertaking for the commission. The project will be paid for by local sales-tax dollars and state and federal funds, though officials have so far set aside only about one-quarter of the money needed.

The decision is also based on Riverside County improving Cajalco Road, which the county has wished to widen to four lanes from Perris to Corona and straighten so the curvy road is safer.

Reducing the project to half its initial length must be approved by the 31-member commission, made up of officials from each of the county's 26 cities and the five county supervisors. The commission's next meeting is June 10.

Commission support of the Mid-County Parkway has been mixed, with members in Perris, Hemet and San Jacinto aggressively lauding it while others in the central and western part of the county were skeptical.

The possible scuttling of a large portion of the parkway was welcomed Tuesday by critics of the project.

"We are just overjoyed to see that we were able to prove our point and open eyes to the impacts this project would have had on this habitat and this community," said longtime opponent Cindy Ferry, who mobilized opposition in the Gavilan Hills and Lake Mathews areas.

But concerns remain for species' habitats east of I-215 as well, said Ileene Anderson, biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity office in Los Angeles. She said natural areas from San Jacinto west to Perris are home to many species, such as the Stephens' kangaroo rat, which is protected by state and federal laws.



"Clearly putting a freeway through conservation preserves that had been established as mitigation for prior impacts to species was outrageous, and the county was wise to discontinue this part of the project for sure," Anderson said. "They still need to look closely at the I-215 eastward project to evaluate if it really will meet the needs of the citizens of the county, or if another strategy to ensure affordable housing close to jobs while preserving open space will better serve the citizenry."

Long Time Not Coming

County transportation and elected officials have spent more than a decade discussing an east-west connection between Interstate 15 and Interstate 215 to help commuters get from San Jacinto and Hemet to Corona. With 4,000 homes proposed in the coming years east of I-215

in Perris, Hemet and San Jacinto, officials said a new connection was needed.

The parkway, often called a freeway by opponents, varied from four to eight lanes in places. While not technically a freeway, some areas of the divided road had freeway-like characteristics, such as entrance and exit ramps linking to local roads. Other areas had crossings with local roads.

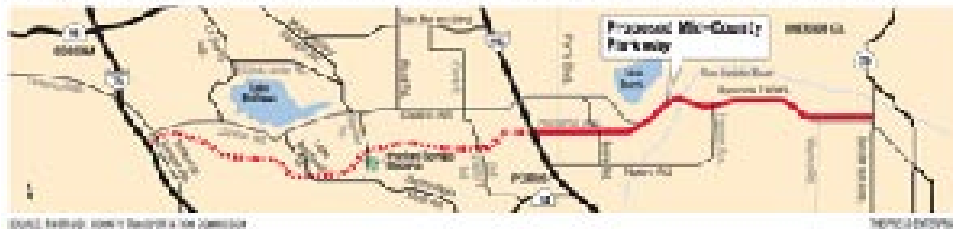
Last year, the Riverside County Transportation Commission settled on a proposed route following Ramona Expressway from San Jacinto to Placentia Avenue in downtown Perris, then crossing a rural area west of Perris before heading toward Cajalco Road in southern Corona. An environmental report released in October found the route the best of five choices because it did the least environmental damage to plants and animals, and displaced the fewest number of residents.

But even that choice drew criticism from residents -- particularly in the Gavilan Hills area -- and environmental groups, who feared the road would encroach on threatened species and annihilate the area's rural charm.

After three public meetings, two hearings in front of transportation commission members and a separate meeting held by Riverside County Supervisor Bob Buster, officials received 3,100 comments from residents, businesses, public agencies and community organizations.

"This isn't a matter of we won, as if it were a fight," Ferry said Tuesday. "It was about proving our points

SHOW ROAD - Officials are working on plans to build the proposed Mid-County Parkway west of Interstate 95, along environmental issues, health and recreation from a residents.



and making sure our statements were heard."

The decision also came before growth slowed, some of those subdivisions were shelved in San Jacinto and nearby Hemet and transportation officials heard from the public, said commission deputy director John Standiford. Strapped for cash because of lower sales-tax collections and awash with major freeway projects, the Mid-County Parkway proved to be too controversial and too expensive for the effort.

"We'd rather focus on other projects that really can be built in the next few years," Standiford said.

Officials plan to widen I-215, Highway 91 and Interstate 15 in many places.

Cajalco Can Carry

Not building the Mid-County Parkway west of I-215 should not cripple traffic in the area because the county transportation department -- which maintains county roads as opposed to the transportation commission that focuses on funding and planning regional transportation projects -- is widening Cajalco Road. Transportation Department Director Juan Perez said a widened Cajalco can accommodate growth for years to come.

"I feel, frankly, that four lanes on Cajalco can get us beyond 2025," Perez said.

Two lanes in each direction and other improvements from I-215 to Temescal Canyon Road in Corona will cost between \$150 million and \$200 million, Perez said. The project is broken into various phases, and officials do not have a set schedule.

Even with Cajalco Road, Standiford said not building the parkway to Corona could put some added stress on I-215 and the 91 as drivers choose to get to Corona via Riverside.

"We're improving all of those areas," Standiford said. "It's a choice to make the improvements where they can do the most good."

Corona and Caltrans are also planning new entrance and exit ramps at many locations along I-15, which could help reduce congestion getting to and from the freeways.

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