

# NORTH COUNTY TIMES

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## Public input sought on emerging plans for new highways

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Despite the dizzying pace of construction of new homes, schools and shopping centers, no new freeways have been built in western Riverside County since the mid-1980s, when the last sections of Interstate 15 were completed.

But that could all be changing soon. Regional transportation officials are exploring ideas for two new freeways and a new bypass for an existing highway in the area.

One of the proposed roads is a 32-mile, east-west freeway that would run from north of Lake Elsinore to Hemet; the other would cross the Cleveland National Forest and drop drivers off somewhere in Orange County. The bypass would give Highway 79 North (Winchester Road) motorists the option of driving around the west side of Hemet, instead of inching through a long string of traffic signals in town.

The three big projects are in the early stages, with start of construction at least five years away. And while officials know generally where they want to go, no project has a defined route yet. The Riverside County Transportation Commission, the agency planning Riverside County's regional transportation system, is working to determine the best places for them and officials are asking for the public's help.

To that end, the agency has scheduled several public meetings this month and early next. The series kicks off Thursday in Lake Elsinore, with a meeting on the proposed Riverside County-to-Orange County connection. Other meetings are set for Sept. 21 in San Jacinto, Sept. 22 in Perris, Sept. 23 in Corona, Sept. 29 in Hemet and Oct. 6 in San Jacinto.

Driven by that dizzying pace of construction, population growth is accelerating and traffic is mounting. And, just a few days ago, the Texas Transportation Institute rated Riverside and San Bernardino counties as having the seventh worst congestion in the nation, with motorists spending an average 57 hours a year stuck in stop-and-go traffic.

With Riverside County's population already standing at 1.8 million and projected to crack the 3 million mark by 2020, new highways are needed, as well as new lanes on existing roads, more buses and more trains, said Ron Roberts, a Temecula councilman and regional transportation commissioner.

"We have to do something," Roberts said.

Not the answer

But not everyone agrees new freeways are the answer.

Monica Bond of the Center for Biological Diversity, an environmental group with a regional office in Idyllwild, said freeways

will just invite more urban sprawl.

"It's for people to be able to live in Riverside County and work in Orange County, and drive their cars," Bond said. "It's just going to increase sprawl and bring all the bad things associated with that. Is this what we want? Do we want to just keep building more freeways?"

Bond said the proposed east-west highway threatens the Lake Mathews area, a cornerstone of the county's strategy for developing a system of preserves to protect dozens of imperiled species of plants and animals. And she said punching a road through the Cleveland National Forest into Orange County would isolate wide-ranging wildlife such as the mountain lion.

"It's a beleaguered little forest," Bond said. "It's already the most urbanized forest in the country."

As for the notion that another road is needed to deliver Riverside County commuters to their jobs in Orange County, Bond suggested Riverside County residents would be better off working closer to home.

"I would rather have it be more difficult to get to Orange County, and preserve the endangered species and whatever rural feel we have left," she said.

Roberts said environmentalists' concerns must be taken into account.

"I understand where they are coming from," he said. "I don't intend to support destroying the environment just to put a road through."

And Roberts maintained that officials don't have to destroy the national forest. He said the region can follow the example of Japan and build a road with care, without a lot of blasting and earth moving and scars on the land.

### **Not enough**

Riverside County officials already have plans to widen Interstates 15 and 215 and Highway 79, and to add more Metrolink trains and Riverside Transit Agency buses.

But that won't be enough to cure the congestion, officials say. They argue that there is a strong need for entirely new roads, given, for example, that there is little room left for widening the maxed-out, 12-lane Highway 91 that serves as Riverside County's single major conduit to Orange County jobs, beaches and entertainment. And they note that more than 260,000 cars travel Highway 91 daily, with the number expected to double to a half-million in two decades.

"When it comes to the 91 freeway ... there is just no room for any more expansion," Roberts said.

As well, there is a big gap in the Riverside County road map. No east-west freeways serve the area south of the 91.

"We don't have anything that really brings the county together east to west," said John Standiford, a commission spokesman. "We are sorely lacking in this direction."

Consequently, the commission is heading in the direction of new highways with limited access and few, if any, traffic signals.

For the inter-county route, the commission is teaming up with the Orange County Transportation Authority to study a wide area bounded by the 91 on the north, I-15 on the east, Highway 74 (Ortega High-

way) on the south and I-5 on the west. The road is expected to cost several billion dollars.

"There are no actual routes or lines on a map at this point," Standiford said. But he said the study, which got under way in June and is scheduled to be completed in late 2005, is expected to begin turning up alternatives this winter.

Everything is on the table for now, he said, including tunnels, bridges and potential overland routes. Construction is many years away.

Options for the east-west road across western Riverside County, which already bears the name Mid County Parkway, are more defined. Commissioners envision a road of at least four lanes ---- with room for expansion ---- that roughly follows the track of Cajalco Road between Interstates 15 and 215 and Ramona Expressway east of there. The road is expected to run south of Lake Mathews in the Corona area and south of Lake Perris.

### **Not a 'minor widening'**

Still to be determined is the route and the highway's precise nature, Standiford said. Still also to be determined is whether Mid County Parkway would replace all or parts of Cajalco and Ramona or be built as an entirely new highway, leaving those existing roads intact, he said.

One thing's for sure, Standiford said, "It is not a minor widening of something that's already out there. It is a major addition to our regional transportation system. But to say that it's going to be your typical L.A. freeway, that's not been decided."

Eric Haley, commission executive director, said the Mid County Parkway's price tag is pegged at \$1.5 billion. Construction could begin in 2010 and be completed in a decade.

Standiford said the commission is treating Mid County Parkway and the Riverside-Orange highway as separate projects, but officials are eyeing the potential for lining them up at the same spot on I-15,

providing continuous flow without dumping an extra load on the interstate.

"It sure would be smart to tie that (Mid County Parkway) into the route to Orange County, rather than build the Orange County-to-Riverside County route 10 miles south ---- that wouldn't help anything," Roberts said. He also suggested that the road to Orange County come out in the vicinity of Irvine rather than farther south.

"It's got to come out someplace close to jobs," Roberts said.

The third project, the Highway 79 North bypass, is farthest along. Transportation studies have identified several options for routes around Hemet, including those that follow parts of Domenigoni Parkway, the San Diego Canal and Sanderson Avenue. Besides eliminating the slow ride through Hemet, the project would shorten a highway that now meanders 19 miles to travel 11.

The project extends from Newport Road to Gilman Springs Road. Construction is projected to begin in 2009.

Standiford said the new section would speed up trips for drivers headed for points north of Hemet and San Jacinto.

"It will help those communities, as well, because you won't have trucks rumbling through town," he said.