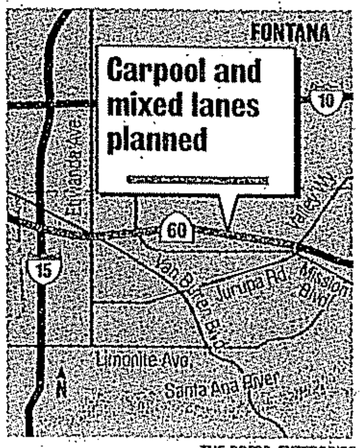
Freeway-widening plan gets approval

HIGHWAY 60: County transportation officials will depend on developer fees to fund the project.

BY BRADLEY WEAVER
THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE



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Faced with diminishing state highway funds, regional transportation leaders approved a plan Wednesday that relies on developer fees to pay for a Highway 60 project that is in jeopardy.

The Riverside County Transportation Commission will tap developers for $13 million to begin a freeway-widening project between the Riverside-San Bernardino county line just west of Interstate 15 and Valley Way in Rubidoux.

The job will add a carpool lane and mixed-flow lane to each side of the freeway along that seven-mile stretch northwest of Riverside.

The project was approved for state money earlier this year, but budget cuts threatened to throw the project off schedule.

Transportation officials agreed Wednesday to use the so-called Transportation Uniform Mitigation Fee, or TUMF, to pay for the project.

Riverside County implemented the fee last year to make newcomers pay their share of the cost to build new roads. The fee is expected to raise $2.6 billion over the next 20 years.

Without the TUMF money, the Highway 60 project would have faced a delay of two to four years. Now, construction can begin by next fall, commission director Eric Haley said.

"If we miss this window of opportunity, we'll be at the mercy of state budget issues and unknown programming delays," Haley said. "We didn't want to be in this position today ... but the state funding drought continues."

The magnitude of the job can't be underestimated, committee members said. As many as 140,000 vehicles use that stretch of freeway each day and by 2020, daily traffic is predicted to jump to 205,000 vehicles.

The state-approved funds attached to the Highway 60 project will be shifted instead to a much-larger job of improving the intersection of Highway 60 and Interstate 215 just west of Moreno Valley.

Depending on when those funds are allocated, that project could get under way within three years and cost at least $40 million.

That's good news to commission member and Desert Hot Springs City Councilman Hank Hohenstein, who said improvements are sorely needed at that congested interchange.

"This is like a gift from heaven," he said. "We all know how bad that freeway is getting. Without this maneuver the project in Moreno Valley would be put off for a decade."

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OUR VIEWS

Road whims

California transportation spending has ground to a halt, and so will California drivers unless they find local money to keep their roads functional.

This month, the state stalled spending on transportation projects until at least December. That delays plans for Inland road work, including a new carpool lane along Highway 60 and reconstruction of the Green River Bridge in Corona.

It's longstanding practice for local transportation dollars to help leverage state road money. But with California mired in a years-long budget crisis, local transportation money may provide the only fuel left for road improvements.

In recent years, the governor and Legislature have found it easier to raid transportation funds than confront the underlying flaws in the state budget. As a result, California doesn't have enough money to advance the road projects it wants and needs.

Here's how ridiculous it's become: State road funding hinges on the defeat of two gambling measures on the Nov. 2 ballot. The initiatives would overturn gambling compacts with five tribes that have pledged $1.2 billion in bonds to replace transportation money filched by legislators.

> Here's how ridiculous it's become: State road funding hinges on the defeat of two gambling measures in November.

Shouldn't California have a better plan for renovating its highways than hoping voters don't nullify agreements on casinos?

No wonder about a dozen transportation sales-tax measures appear on the Nov. 2 ballot across California, including Measure I in San Bernardino County. Without the money these half-percent taxes generate, local governments would have scant way to address the traffic demands of a growing economy and population.

Anyone who drives knows this state can't thrive without a transportation network that can handle its commerce and commuting. Absent sweeping changes in the state's budget or habits, Californians are on their own when it comes to helping traffic flow freely.

They can depend on themselves — as Riverside County voters have done, and San Bernardino County voters can do on Nov. 2 — or they can depend the whims of state budget writers.

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Chamber on Top of Transportation Topics

RCTC's Eric Haley Briefed EDC on Interchange, 91 Alternatives

by LAURA L. KLURE
Feature Writer

Transportation issues continue to be one of the top items of interest to Greater Riverside Chamber members. Riverside County Transportation Commission (RCTC) Executive Director Eric Haley recently briefed the Chamber's Economic Development Committee on the state's fiscal challenges, work on the 60/91/215 Interchange, and the possibilities for an alternative to the 91 Freeway.

Haley said that thanks to Riverside County voters, local funds have been available to continue work on some projects that otherwise would be scrapped, due to the lack of state and federal funds.

The state and federal governments are denying us our statutory funding, he said. Statewide, the un-funded transportation losses are about $5.5 billion.

"There's been a real sea-change in how things are funded," Haley said. In the past 15 years, the percentage of federal and state funding on highway projects has dropped dramatically in Riverside County, from an aggregate of about 98 percent in 1988, to less than 33 percent today. He said that 67 percent of transportation funding is now locally generated.

"The citizens of the county have stepped up, in the hope of accelerating the improvements to transportation," he said.

With the recent wet weather, Prop. 42 funds are especially needed to fix potholes. Haley said the road conditions are getting worse every morning. The situation has developed under the administration of the past two governors, and he does not see near-

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Transportation...

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term action by the legislature to reduce the gap in transportation funding.

Steel, Concrete Among Interchange Problems

Chamber members were very grateful for recent announcements that work is resuming on the 60/91/215 Interchange. "Its very important that we get this interchange done and functioning smoothly as soon as possible." said Chamber President Cindy Roth.

A short delay in work occurred in February during a dispute between the primary contractor, Washington-Obayashi, and Caltrans. Roth said it was not so important to determine who was wrong, as it was to get the work started again.

Haley said construction costs were part of the problem. "The facts are that steel has gone through the roof. Concrete costs are also up," he said.

Roth and other Chamber leaders made many contacts with legislators and transportation representatives, urging that work on the Interchange should resume. Assemblymember John Benoit (R-Palm Desert) was among those who assisted with negotiations between the two sides. People involved expressed relief that an agreement was reached and work is resuming, but the terms were not yet made public. Some disruption of the work had also occurred due to the weather.

Haley said the Interchange is the most significant project ongoing in Southern California, and is the second largest in the state.

Narrowing Choices for Route to OC

Developing an alternative route to Orange County is an extremely challenging issue, Haley said. Studies are continuing this year, with the aim of narrowing choices down to one or two corridor alternatives by December

"That's when all the real intense fun will begin," he quipped. Haley said that in both counties, each city has an opinion about which option they like best, based on their differing priorities.

Some have suggested widening the capacity of the existing 91 Freeway, but he said the space available may be too limited. Between the National Forest and the Santa Ana River, there are a lot of environmental issues with which to deal.

Various routes over the mountains and a tunnel through the mountains have been suggested. The new route will likely be partially funded through tolls, he indicated, and the financial interests of existing toll road operators add complexity to the mix.

"It will be one of America's most difficult, and I hope not most controversial projects," he said.

Haley said Riverside County has long-term, secure funding, and Orange County needs to come up with its share. "Our Orange County friends are going to need to extend their sales tax, their Measure M," he said.

Some Chamber members suggested that bringing more jobs to Riverside County will reduce the commuter traffic to Orange County.

Public meetings are being held about the project alternatives, with two already held in March. The CETAP: Riverside County to Orange County Major Investment Study public meetings this month are in San Juan Capistrano April 12, and in Lake Elsinore April 14. See the RCTC website, www.rctc.org, for details of locations and times.

Your Chamber's Economic Development Committee meets on the fourth Tuesday, at 7:30 a.m., and this is a good place to stay on top of such vital issues.

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Collaborative roads

Taxpayers seldom win when one government agency sues another. But on occasion, only legal action can spur government officials to honor the public interest.

So it's encouraging that on Wednesday Temecula settled a lawsuit against the Riverside County Board of Supervisors over building new roads in the teeming French Valley corridor. With state and local coffers low on cash for road construction, the deal makes developers responsible for the highway improvements their new homes will necessitate.

Temecula filed suit in November 2003, arguing that the county's general plan would exacerbate congestion. The plan let builders shoehorn new subdivisions into unincorporated areas near the city without first upgrading streets and highways.

After 17 months, the city-county deal fell in place. Developers must complete road projects before residents are allowed to occupy new homes. The mandate to widen highways in advance should unclog the congestion on freeway off-ramps and along such thoroughfares as Winchester, Scott and Clinton Keith roads.

The agreement incorporates long-range thinking, as well. Temecula and the county will pay the Riverside County Transportation Commission to examine ways to align population growth with freeway and highway construction in the southwest county.

So long as housing in the Inland region remains affordable by Southern California standards, new residents will keep coming — and this settlement offers a model of collaboration and regional perspective.

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Embrace anti-traffic fee

A competitive disadvantage? That is the wrong way to view a program that raises billions of dollars for local transportation needs. If anything, Riverside County is well ahead of neighboring counties in grappling with one of the most crucial challenges facing Southern California: gridlock.

A city councilman in Calimesa this week was the latest public official to lament an 8.8 percent increase in the Transportation Uniform Mitigation Fee. The levy, which is charged on new development to help finance local and regional transportation projects, is climbing to keep pace with rising steel and concrete costs.

> Any perceived disadvantage is at worst temporary.

Building a home in Calimesa does cost more than in neighboring Yucaipa, which is in San Bernardino County and not subject to the fee. But that narrow view misses the big picture.

First, San Bernardino County cities will soon impose a transportation fee, as part of the extension in November of that county's Measure I transportation sales tax increase. So any perceived disadvantage is at worst temporary.

Second, the fee ensures that new growth pays a fair share toward building and improving roads, while allowing better long-term planning for streets, highways, bridges and other transit necessities.

Rathern than fretting that other counties are pulling ahead in development, Riverside County cities should be asking why other counties lag so far behind in funding critical transportation needs.

Time to demand action on traffic

DAN WALTERS
SACRAMENTO BEE COLUMNIST

The Inland Empire achieved a dubious distinction the other day.

The Texas Transportation Institute elevated, if that's the word, the region into the list of the nation's five most traffic-congested areas – and it found itself in familiar company. The adjacent Los Angeles region (including part of Orange and Ventura counties) retained its longstanding title as the nation's most congested and the Bay area continued in its No. 2 ranking.

Understanding California's dominance of the traffic jam sweepstakes doesn't take a degree in astrophysics. Simple math will do.

A decade ago, Californians were operating just over 26 million registered vehicles. Today more than 31 million vehicles (including 20.6 million cars and 7.3 million trucks) now call California home.

That increase of 5 million vehicles works out to more than 1,300 every 24 hours and roughly approximates the state's population growth during the period.

As more human beings are born in or migrate to California, as the economy continues to evolve into a post-industrial mode, and as housing becomes more expensive, Californians find themselves making ever-longer automotive commutes. And as rapidly as people and vehicles proliferate, therefore, automobile and truck traffic is growing even faster.

Vehicular traffic has doubled in California in the last two decades, a period in which the overall population increased by perhaps 40 percent. More people, more cars and much more driving, however, are packed into a road and highway system that has been expanding at a snail's pace, thanks to shortsighted political decision-making.

In an era when traffic is increasing geometrically, those who ran for office on promises to take care of the public's needs have actually been reducing the funds available for building new highways, maintaining the overstressed roadways we already use or expanding mass transit as an alternative to behind-the-wheel travel. And we are letting them get away with it.

Why do Californians tolerate the diversion of billions of dollars that are supposed to go to improve and expand roads?

A few years ago, when the state was wallowing in dot-com dollars, then-Gov. Gray Davis proposed to divert a relative few of them into "traffic congestion relief." That was a pretty good idea, even if the projects chosen for financing were designated in the governor's office, rather than through the regular planning process, and included several with questionable ties, such as an interchange to serve an Indian gambling casino that had contributed substantially to Davis' campaign fund.

A few of those few dollars were actually spent before Davis and the Legislature found themselves staring into a fiscal abyss (thanks to overspending the rest of the dot-com windfall on permanent programs and tax cuts). The remaining transportation dollars were quickly diverted back into the general fund to cover rapidly growing deficits, many hundreds of millions of regular gas tax funds suffered the same fate, and even after voters decreed that sales taxes on gasoline should be spent on transportation, those dollars were also diverted.

Davis' successor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, is making much of an increase in transportation spending in the 2004-05 budget, but the significance of the supposed boost fades when one examines the fine print. The state will take another $1.2 billion from the gasoline sales tax while repaying $1.4 billion to the various highway accounts that had been diverted previously, almost all of which would originate in payments from Indian gambling casinos. In other words, slightly improving transportation financing is now dependent on Californians losing more money after driving to casinos.

Transportation has slowed to a crawl to cover up politicians' foolish behavior – California is now dead last in per capita spending among the states – while the state suffers from the nation's worst traffic congestion.

Why do we Californians tolerate this shell game while wasting countless millions of hours of our lives stuck in traffic?