

The great wide way

Caltrans says a project to expand Interstate 5 to as many as 14 lanes will keep commutes from approaching two hours long

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If you like the construction on Interstate 5 at the I-805 merge, you'll love the next major project contemplated for the coastal freeway.

The California Transportation Department is planning to widen I-5 between La Jolla and Oceanside and I-805 between Sorrento Valley and I-5.

That means 28 miles of freeway will be expanded to 12 or 14 lanes in most places, plus two more access lanes in many places. Most of the roadway is now eight or 10 lanes.

Construction is expected to begin in summer 2009, and the project is estimated at \$2.5 billion to \$3.5 billion, depending on how many lanes Caltrans decides to build.

An environmental impact study is under way to determine the configuration. Caltrans expects to release a draft of the study next spring.

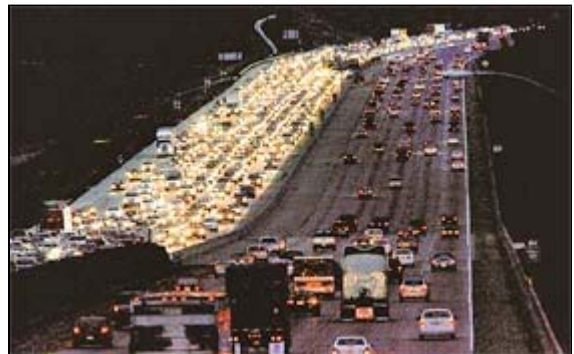
Officials say the project is necessary to accommodate ever-increasing traffic on the highway, one of the county's two major north-south transportation corridors.

"The freeway is functioning at capacity or near capacity even on weekends," Arturo Jacobo, Caltrans' project manager, said recently.

Jacobo said it takes an average of 70 minutes to commute between Oceanside and San Diego today, and the project is needed to maintain the status quo.

"In 2030, even if you do the improvements, the commute will still be at 70 minutes," he said. "If you carpool, that will be reduced to 50 minutes."

He said if nothing is done to handle the increased traffic, the 70-minute commute will likely increase to 100 minutes.



DON KOHLBAUER / Union-Tribune
Northbound traffic on Interstate 5 near Del Mar Heights Road proceeded toward the Via de la Valle exit. The California Department of Transportation is planning to widen I-5 between La Jolla and Oceanside to ease congestion.

Interstate 5's busiest segment is north of the I-805 merge, where an average of 265,000 vehicles a day pass between there and Carmel Valley Road. Caltrans estimates that figure will approach 350,000 in 25 years.

Jacobo said that once the excavators begin excavating and the jackhammers start hammering, it will take seven years to finish the job.

"We'll break down the corridor in several stages and work on the stages" simultaneously, Jacobo said.

"The concern we heard from every city is (not to) begin at the south end and move up the line," he said.

Caltrans officials said that the construction will have an impact on traffic while the work is being done and likened it to the project at the I-5/I-805 merge. Most of the work will be outside the main freeway lanes, and lane closures will be limited to times when traffic is not at its peak.

"We shouldn't have a horrible time, but there will be congestion related to construction," said Tom Nipper, an assistant manager on the project.

The southernmost points for the widening project are the La Jolla Drive interchange on I-5 and the Mira Mesa Boulevard interchange on I-805. The northern point is Harbor Drive in Oceanside.

When completed next fall, the I-5/I-805 merge will be the freeway's widest section, at 23 lanes, including bypass lanes that carry cars directly from I-5 and I-805 to state Route 56.

Jacobo said Caltrans is studying widening Interstate 5 to 10 travel lanes plus four carpool lanes, with an auxiliary lane on each side in most places, which allows vehicles to enter and exit the highway away from the main travel lanes. That would make the roadway about 220 feet across, nearly as wide as a football field is long.

Other configurations are being studied, Jacobo said, including eight main lanes and four carpool lanes.

He said Caltrans is reviewing separating carpool lanes from the main lanes with a barrier to prevent cars from weaving in and out.

Caltrans is coordinating the widening with other planned improvements, including future interchanges at state Routes 56 and 78.

Direct access

The widening also proposes five "direct-access ramps," which will allow vehicles to pass from a point off the freeway directly into the carpool lanes. The ramps also will provide direct access for a future "bus rapid transit system," a concept that would use dedicated stations and vehicles that can pre-empt traffic signals to make public transit more attractive.

Direct-access ramps are being studied for I-805 at Lusk Boulevard in Sorrento Valley and on I-5 at Voigt Drive at the University of California San Diego, Manchester Avenue in Encinitas, Cannon Road in Carlsbad and Oceanside Boulevard in Oceanside.

A sixth direct-access ramp is being considered at the I-5/SR 78 interchange.

Jacobo said the project also will necessitate the reconstruction of every bridge and overcrossing in the project area -- 40 in all.

He also said one of the project's goals is to improve conditions at the five lagoons I-5 crosses: San Dieguito, San Elijo, Batiqitos, Agua Hedionda and Buena Vista.

When the freeway was built, little consideration was given to the waterways, and freeway lanes were laid on long earthen berms.

"We want to improve the ecosystem," Jacobo said, by reducing the berms and improving the flow of water beneath the freeway bridges.

Kipp Hefner, an Encinitas associate civil engineer, said the city already was studying the Manchester interchange when the I-5 widening project picked up steam, so the two projects will be done simultaneously to avoid disturbing San Elijo Lagoon twice.

"You've got all that fill that goes across San Elijo Lagoon," Hefner said. "We're doing studies to look at taking out a portion of that fill and possibly aligning the mouth of the lagoon with the opening under the I-5 to improve the tidal flow back into the lagoon itself."

Caltrans has been talking to all the cities along the route.

Residents have asked whether they will have to endure more noise from a wider freeway and if Caltrans will have to take any property for additional lanes.

Right of way

Nipper, the assistant project manager, said most of the widening can be accomplished within the existing right-of-way, but some property will likely have to be taken.

He said in most instances, Caltrans probably will require fragments, but in some instances it may need larger parcels.

The project also will include sound walls to minimize noise.

Richard Leja, a San Diego senior civil engineer, said the city is coordinating the I-5 widening with improving interchanges at Sorrento Valley Road and I-5, Genesee Avenue and I-5 and a bridge-widening at La Jolla Village Drive and I-805.

An environmental analysis that includes all the proposed projects is under way, Leja said. They must tie in with the I-5/I-805 merge and the I-5 widening project, he said.

"They all have to work in unison toward an ultimate goal," he said, adding the city is undertaking a detailed environmental study of I-5 from Voigt Drive to the merge and a separate study for Sorrento Valley Road and I-5.

"It's much easier to do changes with an eraser than with a jackhammer," Leja said.

Solana Beach wrote to Caltrans to express its concern about the number of properties in its city that may

be lost to the project.

Solana Beach Councilman Joe Kellejian said Caltrans responded by saying that the amount of property likely to be taken in Solana Beach would be 1,400 square feet and involve parts of back yards of a handful of houses.

Solana Beach residents also are worried about noise from a wider freeway with more cars and would like sound walls or other features to dampen the noise, such as rubber asphalt on the surface.

"As it gets closer and studies get complete, we'll learn more of the details," said Dan Goldberg, a Solana Beach civil engineer.

Hefner, Encinitas' engineer, said Caltrans is trying to minimize the amount of property it takes for the project by using all the existing right-of-way.

"You're talking about large retaining walls" on the edges, he said.

Bob Johnson, Carlsbad's deputy engineer for transportation, said, "There's just a couple locations where they may need additional right-of-way" in the city.

The most likely area is Holiday Park, which is in the freeway's shadow between Tamarack Avenue and Carlsbad Village Drive.

Johnson said the city could benefit from that because Caltrans may build a sound wall on the east side of the freeway near the park, something the city has been requesting for years.

"The other issue that's being looked at is the direct-access ramp" on the northeast corner of the Cannon Road interchange, Johnson said, on land occupied by strawberry fields.

Caltrans is beginning an environmental impact report of the SR 78/I-5 interchange along the northern shore of Buena Vista Lagoon. Jacobo said that Caltrans intends to combine the widening with the interchange project to avoid disturbing the lagoon twice.

Ramps at Las Flores Drive in Carlsbad and Cassidy and California streets in Oceanside will be included in the traffic studies for the interchange project.

North of the SR 78 interchange, I-5 would likely be eight travel lanes, plus four carpool lanes and auxiliary lanes in some sections, for 14 lanes rather than 16.

Frank Watanabe, Oceanside's community development and transportation director, said, "That's like 50 feet of widening," and preliminary studies show no property would need to be taken for additional right-of-way.

He noted, however, that homes and businesses stand very near the freeway in south Oceanside, routing cars and trucks right outside some bedroom windows.

"That's putting it right to the edge," Watanabe said. "That's where I have doubts."

The Oceanside Unified School District is concerned that the project may cut into grounds at Oceanside High, which overlooks the freeway at Mission Avenue.

Brian Sullivan, a district associate superintendent, said the campus is already constrained, and if any of it has to be taken for the freeway it could affect the school's baseball field or tennis courts.

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