

Village Beat

By Kelly Mahan

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Caltrans Hosts Meetings. Over one hundred residents came out to the Montecito Country Club on Tuesday evening, to hear Caltrans representatives outline their plans for widening the 101 freeway through Montecito. The project, called the South Coast High Occupancy Vehicle (HOV) project, is the fourth of four phases to widen the freeway between Santa Barbara and Ventura.

The first phase, the Milpas to Hot Springs portion of the widening, is under construction now; it is expected to be finished next year. In April, the second phase, which expands the freeway from Carpinteria to Mussel Shoals, is expected to begin. The third phase includes Carpinteria interchanges: Linden Avenue and Casitas Pass.

Although the construction time-frame of the fourth phase is not until 2017 to 2025, Caltrans is holding three meetings this week to inform residents of five different options slated for Montecito. This phase of the project, which stretches from Bailard to Cabrillo Blvd, is expected to cost \$425 million, depending on which option is chosen.

The 10.3-mile stretch of freeway affected includes 11 creek crossings, seven overcrossings, four under crossings, and a constrained physical environment including frontage roads, the railroad, homes, businesses and wet-lands, according to project manager Scott Eades. Santa Barbara County Association of Government (SBCAG) rep Gregg Hart explained that studies have shown by the year 2040, traffic will be too congested for two freeway lanes. In order to accommodate the third lane, several interchanges will need to be rebuilt.

As part of the project, Caltrans has opted to remove all fast lane exits and onramps; the exit/entrance at Sheffield will be relocated to the outside of the freeway, and the left hand off-ramps at Cabrillo Blvd/Hot Springs Road will also be removed.

Here's a recap of the five options, two of which were added after meeting with some Montecito homeowners from the neighborhoods near Hermosillo back in March. Eades points out these options were narrowed down from 28 different configurations.

The first, called option "M," would add a new northbound off-ramp in the area between the freeway and the roundabout, feeding cars to either turn right and go through the roundabout or turn left to head towards the beach. To accommodate the new exit, changes on the southbound side of the freeway will need to include raising the Los Patos Way undercrossing, and turning it into a "hook" on-ramp and off-ramp (Hot Springs Road southbound exit will be closed). In this option, the current north-bound off-ramp at Hermosillo Drive would also be closed. "M Modified," which was added after homeowner input, is the same as "M," but calls for keeping the Hermosillo exit intact.

Option "J" also includes the upgrades at Los Patos Way, but in this case the current Hermosillo off-ramp would be improved; it would be the only north-bound exit for beach traffic. To make it appropriate for high volume use, the off-ramp needs to be extended further on the freeway, and a roundabout or traffic signal would be installed.

Option "F" improves the Hermosillo Drive off-ramp as in option "J," but eliminates the Los Patos Way exit. The southbound lanes will be moved towards the median, eliminating median

landscaping, and a new southbound on/off ramp will be built at Cabrillo Blvd. "F Modified" calls for also adding an exit at Hot Springs Road, in addition to keeping Hermosillo open.

As far as landscaping, Caltrans is looking at three options: maximizing the plant space in the median (there-fore working towards the exterior), maximizing the plant space on the exterior (minimizing a median), or a combination of both.

The new HOV lane will be part time and continuous access, meaning there are no designated entrances and exits to the lane. Motorcycles will also be permitted to use the lane at all times.

In addition to seeing large maps of the various reconfigurations, attendees were invited to peruse boards outlining traffic volumes, sound walls, landscaping options, and options for freeway congestion including a commuter rail and commuter bus service. "We tried to design a package of improvements to deal with the congestion," said Hart. He explained a commuter rail between Santa Barbara and Ventura is also in the works, and could be up and running as early as next summer.

Comments from residents were not documented at the meeting, and Eades said there would be plenty of time during the environmental review process for public input. The draft EIR is expected to be released in January 2012, with public hearings in the spring. Eades said technical studies already performed include noise, visual impacts, biology, air and water quality, and several others. "We are here because we realize this is a big project and it has huge implications for people who drive this corridor and live in this corridor," he said. Homeowners who live close to the freeway will be given the opportunity to vote for or against proposed sound walls.

"There is a lot of process ahead of us; there is plenty of time for public input," he reiterated after members of the audience asked about project transparency.

For more information about the project, Scott Eades can be reached at 549-3144. Or visit www.sbcag.org.