

Posted on Fri, Mar. 07, 2008

Hwy. 46 East growth plan spurs worry

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Paso Robles officials expressed worry this week over Caltrans' plans to make Highway 46 East a six-lane freeway.

The concerns came to light Wednesday at a workshop held by Caltrans as part of a corridor study for the road — the eastern portion to the Kern County line and the western stretch from Paso Robles to Highway 1 near Cambria.

City Manager Jim App asked why Caltrans' transportation draft, completed in the fall, includes plans for Highway 46 East to be an uninterrupted, six-lane freeway with current intersections converted to overpasses.

“That is not the ideal solution for a community already divided by a river, a railroad and two or three highways,” App said, while also expressing concerns over how a project that could cost more than \$100 million would be funded.

Councilman Duane Picanco said during the workshop that he worries Caltrans officials already have a plan for the highway that they aren't sharing with the public.

Traffic on Highway 46, the midstate connector from the Central Coast to the Central Valley, could double in 20 years, according to Caltrans.

Average daily traffic on the highway is 19,400 vehicles, increasing by 18 percent during the summer, Caltrans reported. Semitrucks make up about 20 percent of the traffic.

Aileen Loe of Caltrans confirmed that the draft does contain the vision for Highway 46 East that App described. But she told the crowd that her department is willing to listen to community input.

“We want to focus on how it works and how it could best work for you,” said Loe, deputy director of Caltrans District 5, which serves San Luis Obispo County and four surrounding counties.

Locals have nicknamed Highway 46 East “Blood Alley” because of the number of high-speed, head-on, fatal incidents on the road.

A collective effort

The corridor study is a joint effort by the state, county, city of Paso Robles and San Luis Obispo Council of Governments. It will look at Highway 46 in San Luis Obispo County, with emphasis from Highway 101 to Jardine Road.

Workshop participants were concerned about particular intersections with Highway 46 East, including at Golden Hill and Airport roads.

Most said the biggest problem on the highway occurs Friday afternoons and evenings, when Central Valley traffic floods into Paso Robles en route to Highway 101.

Project engineer Larry Newland cautioned against blaming outsiders entirely.

“It’s not just a tourist driving a Winnebago” who is responsible for the congestion, he said.

The study, which is expected to be done this fall, is under way as officials prepare to widen Highway 46 East from two to four lanes east of Paso Robles.

A groundbreaking for the first phase of a \$35 million project to widen the highway from Airport Road east to Geneseo Road is set for early April. That work, more than five miles of highway, is expected to be completed in 2010.

Other city concerns

The city is in a unique position at the crossroads of Highways 46 and 101, Loe said.

“These are two of the most important routes in the state.”

The city is concerned with those intersections.

Traffic turning left off Highway 46 East onto Highway 101 South in Paso Robles sometimes backs up for miles at peak travel times.

Installing dual left turn lanes is expected to improve the clog, but work is not moving forward yet. The project could cost between \$5.6 million and \$15.9 million, depending on what changes are included.

Environmental review is nearly done on a plan to improve the Highway 46 West interchange at the south end of the city. It could cost between \$29 million and \$35 million, according to Caltrans projections, and is not yet funded.

Paso Robles engineer John Falkenstein said the city's other concerns about the highway, particularly on the east side, are providing ways for pedestrians and cyclists to cross it safely and creating a more aesthetically pleasing gateway to the city.

Councilman Gary Nemeth suggested that Caltrans look at ways to slow traffic in the last three to five miles before it hits Highway 101.

Two more public meetings about Highway 46 are planned. On May 29, Caltrans will present possible solutions for the corridor and solicit public feedback. A date for the second meeting has not been set, but it is expected to happen in September.