

I-5 widening project will connect L.A. to Orange County in a bigger way

By Steve Scauzillo, San Gabriel Valley Tribune
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Pick a live traffic map, any app. Click the 5 Freeway in southeast Los Angeles County. You will be seeing red.

"I don't care if you use SigAlert, Google maps or Caltrans' QuickMap, that area is always red. Why? It's here where the freeway is three lanes," explained John Yang, the new I-5 construction manager for Caltrans, pointing to the seven-mile bottleneck stretching from the 605 Freeway to the Orange

County line.

Caltrans began the widening project in 2012, but construction activity will intensify starting Monday. The project will add two lanes to the 5 Freeway in each direction: four mixed-flow lanes plus one HOV or car-pool lane.

Having five lanes each way is the proverbial gold at the end of the construction rainbow.

"The three lanes each way is not moving very quickly," said Yvette Kirrin, executive director and engineer for the I-5 Consortium Cities Joint Powers Authority.

Almost any time of the day, 24/7, Yang said, traffic on this stretch of the 5 Freeway is below 20 mph (red) or slightly faster at 25 mph (orange). The goal of the \$1.6-billion widening project is to raise that traffic speed significantly for the section's 220,000 daily riders.

Besides the 5 Freeway, the project will increase the chances for major freeway expansions along the 605 and 710 freeways, experts said. Designs for I-5 widening from the 605 to the 710 freeways into Commerce, Montebello and East Los Angeles are underway, said Noe Negrete, director of public works for Santa Fe Springs. But mostly, this southern I-5 corridor project restores the 5 Freeway as the preeminent north-south corridor in the West, as well as a major route for goods traveling between the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach and points south and east.

"The 5 Freeway has served a vital role connecting all of California," said Steve Finnegan, government affairs manager for the Automobile Club of Southern California. "It runs from the Canadian border to the Mexican border. It is probably the most important highway corridor in the western United States."

The Consortium Cities, made up of Buena Park, Commerce, Downey, La Mirada, Norwalk and Santa Fe Springs, has been working on getting their neck of the freeway widened for 22 years. They've tried to reduce the number of houses and businesses that have been affected or purchased by Caltrans, while helping residents navigate detours and street closures for the next four years.

Caltrans estimates the bulk of the construction will take place starting Monday and continue until late 2017 or early 2018, when the project is expected to be finished. Also on Monday, Caltrans will close Firestone Boulevard until April.

Many look at the 10-plus lanes on the Orange County portion between Buena Park and Santa Ana and say: Why can't L.A. County do that? Some say L.A. County is embarrassed by the O.C., which finished its I-5 widening project in 2005 — a segment marked by green bars all the way beyond Disneyland until the Orange Crush.

"Clearly, Orange County made a decision to invest in their portion of I-5 and created a world-class freeway. Unfortunately, it has taken a long time for L.A. County to catch up," Finnegan said.

Commuters and others traveling to and from Orange County beaches, Disneyland or Angel Stadium of Anaheim are struck by the stark difference in the freeway lanes and conditions once they enter La Mirada and start applying the brakes.

"You see a modern facility dead-ending at the county line, hitting a facility that was built in the 1950s," Finnegan said.

Since Orange County widened its segment, the bottleneck starts at La Mirada in the south end. It has literally put the small bedroom community on the map.

"We'll gladly give up the free advertisements on the news when they say traffic is stuck in La Mirada," said the town's mayor, Steve DeRuse. "This is something that should have been done 10 years ago right after what was done in Orange County."

Funding was temporarily removed from the project twice during the past five years, adding to delays, Negrete said.

Critics say mass transit is a more efficient and cost-effective option because it moves more people per mile than single-occupancy vehicles on a freeway. They say adding freeway lanes in car-happy Southern California doesn't move the needle away from gridlock.

"There is no panacea in adding lanes. This just moves the congestion around. They'll just have another choke point somewhere else," said Bart Reed, executive director of the Transit Coalition, a San Fernando Valley-based group that supports trains, buses and car-pool lanes instead of freeways.

"People always criticize the high-speed rail project because of the cost. But no one ever criticizes road projects," he noted, saying Angelenos are brainwashed by the dominant car culture.

But other than mass transit advocates, you won't find many people complaining about the money spent on the freeway widening. Most of the complaints will come from nearby residents who find surface streets and major arterials blocked. Ironically, traffic on the freeway itself may move a little quicker now that off-ramps for Pioneer Boulevard and Alondra Boulevard are already closed. Caltrans is building higher and wider bridges to fit the new, wider freeway.

In January, Caltrans begins a major segment, the Florence Avenue project in Downey and Santa Fe Springs. In mid-2014, it will start the last leg, the Valley View Avenue interchange in La Mirada. In all six of the I-5 improvement segments, bridges and streets will be widened, new off- and on-ramps constructed as well as new frontage roads. The six segments from north to south are: Florence Avenue Interchange; Imperial Highway, Pioneer Boulevard and San Antonio Drive bridges; Rosecrans Avenue and Bloomfield Avenue bridges; Carmenita Road Interchange; Alondra Boulevard Bridge, and the Valley View Avenue Interchange.

The cities of Santa Fe Springs, Downey, Commerce and La Mirada are bracing for the expected delays and detours, not to mention construction dust and noise.

Crews will be in Santa Fe Springs for the next two years, and Negrete knows he'll hear the complaints. He told a group gathered at the Town Center last month that everyone in town will be affected.

But like other cities in the construction zone, they are willing to suffer through years of delays for a wider, faster-moving freeway.

"I'm looking for somebody to host a block party in 2016," Negrete jokingly told the audience.

La Mirada won't see relief until 2018, since its segment is the last to be done.

Already, one company told the mayor it had planned on relocating to La Mirada but decided not to because of the coming construction.

"Still, we feel the outcome will be positive," DeRuse said.

The project means that for the first time, Orange and Los Angeles counties will be properly connected along the 5 Freeway, the Auto Club's Finnegan said.

That connection has become more important during the last 30 years as commuting routes have switched. Now, Orange County draws more workers who commute.

"More recently, statistics show more people who live in Los Angeles County commute to jobs in Orange County than the reverse," Finnegan said.

Whichever way the traffic flows along the 5, one thing is certain: It gets jammed when cars squeeze into three lanes.

"It will be awesome for our communities," said Norwalk City Councilman Mike Mendez, who has chaired the I-5 Consortium Cities Joint Powers Authority for 22 years and lobbied for the widening project in Washington, D.C., for a quarter-century. "It will be a win-win for everybody."

To learn more, go to www.I-5info.com or call the project's toll-free hotline: 855-454-6335.