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## Studies contradict forecast for O.C. tollway benefits

The controversial Foothill South route proposed through a state park would not greatly ease congestion on Interstate 5, according to new figures.

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November 14, 2006

New traffic studies contradict optimistic predictions that a proposed tollway through San Onofre State Beach would eliminate much of the congestion on Interstate 5 in South County.

Most of I-5 in South County will be "consistently congested" at rush hour by 2030 even if the controversial Foothill South toll road extension is built, according to the Orange County Transportation Authority's long-range transportation plan for 2006.

The forecasts assume construction of the tollway, a carpool lane each way on the I-5 and some interchange improvements. If only the tollway is built, the study suggests, the situation will be even worse, with motorists on the interstate seeing "severely congested" conditions.

Environmentalists and other tollway opponents have seized on the long-range plan as a sign that the benefits of the proposed six-lane tollway do not justify sacrificing one of the state's most popular parks.

The Irvine-based Transportation Corridor Agencies, which operates a 51-mile network of tollways in Orange County, plans to build the Foothill South through the northern half of San Onofre. The park's campgrounds, wildlife areas, panoramic views and world-renowned surf spots attract about 2.7 million visitors a year.

The controversy has raged for more a decade and is unlikely to end soon. Environmentalists and the state attorney general are pursuing lawsuits to halt construction of the tollway, and it still requires state and federal approval.

"Why are we building a project with a stated purpose that won't be achieved, at the expense of our parkland?" said James Birkelund, an attorney for the Natural Resources Defense Council, an environmental advocacy group.

Opponents say the toll agency's forecasts have been unreliable in the past, leading to financial problems for the San Joaquin Hills tollway and a downsizing of the Foothill South project

from eight lanes to six.

The toll agency, which is planning to build the Foothill South by 2011, has predicted that the road would help create congestion-free driving conditions on much of southern Interstate 5 by 2025. Traffic relief has been one of the project's main selling points.

Without the Foothill South, tollway officials say, travel times on I-5 from the San Diego County line to Oso Parkway — roughly 16 miles — would be an hour during peak periods in 2025 instead of 25 minutes.

"We know there's going to be more traffic on the 5 Freeway in the future," said Lisa Telles, a tollway spokeswoman. "If you don't build the toll road, there will just be more congestion."

TCA officials say that although most of their assumptions are the same, the two agencies' studies are different and thus can't be compared directly.

Now estimated to cost \$875 million, the tollway extension would run from Interstate 5 at Basilone Road south of San Clemente to Oso Parkway in Rancho Santa Margarita. It would connect with the Foothill toll road after coursing through San Onofre State Beach and the Donna O'Neill Land Conservancy, a 1,200-acre open-space preserve set aside as mitigation for housing development.

Tollway officials have concluded that the route — one of eight options studied — would do the least harm to the environment and avoid the cost of condemning hundreds of homes and businesses in South County.

Dubbed the "green alignment" by the agency, the Foothill South would handle 24,000 to 52,000 daily trips by motorists in 2025 depending on the section of highway, the toll agency predicts.

"Green means Go!" the agency's promotional materials state. "Foothill-South: Your road map to traffic relief."

Like OCTA's, the corridor agency's own forecasts assume the tollway will be built as well as other improvements made to Interstate 5, including a carpool lane each way.

Tollway officials estimate that vehicle trips on I-5 would be reduced from 290,000 a day to 267,000 in the Dana Point-San Clemente area. The least benefit would occur in the Lake Forest area, where traffic would be reduced from 413,000 trips to 406,000.

The agency's studies predict that the number of congested I-5 segments would be reduced 70% during the evening rush hour, usually the busiest time of day.

The agency's environmental impact statement shows that if the Foothill South is not built, much of Interstate 5 in South County will be heavily congested by 2025.

With the tollway, the agency's environmental documents show that I-5 from Alicia Parkway to

the San Diego County line would be uncongested at rush hour except for two short sections between Avenida Pico and El Camino Real in San Clemente and between Ortega Highway and Camino Capistrano in San Juan Capistrano. Those would be lightly to moderately congested at peak times.

"Will the south extension alleviate traffic in Orange County? Absolutely," said Lake Forest City Councilman Peter Herzog, an agency board member. "By way of analysis, we have congestion on the I-5 now and we have 51 miles of toll roads. The point is that we are taking many daily trips off the freeway."

But OCTA's long-range transportation plan, which was completed in July, predicts a far more congested future for I-5 than the toll agency envisions.

OCTA studies indicate that daily vehicle trips on south I-5 between Avenida Pico and the San Joaquin Hills interchange will increase from about 250,000 to 364,000 by 2030.

Between the tollway and the El Toro Y, vehicle trips are expected to increase from 342,000 to 460,000, a level that easily exceeds the daily flow on the 405 Freeway around Los Angeles International Airport.

Assuming the tollway and I-5 improvements are completed, OCTA's study indicates that the interstate will go from "moderately" to "consistently" congested during rush hour along much of its path through southern Orange County.

"Even with a fully functional Foothill South, I-5 will still be bad. The tollway is not as advertised," said Laguna Niguel Mayor Cathryn DeYoung, a former OCTA board member who unsuccessfully challenged Patricia Bates for county supervisor in last week's election.

DeYoung questioned the Foothill South proposal during her election campaign. While at OCTA, she requested a major study of south I-5, now underway, to find ways to reduce future congestion.

"Both agencies should sit down, look at the data and determine what they are going to do," DeYoung said.

OCTA spokesman Michael Litschi said he did not want to comment on which study might be more valid.

Tollway foes say that before any tollway extension is built, I-5 should be widened and improved to see if it alone can accommodate future traffic growth.

The OCTA study "really proves that the way to fix congestion on I-5 is to fix I-5," said Elizabeth Goldstein, president of the California State Parks Foundation.

"It's become imperative that the TCA reconsider their choice here."

Tollway opponents note that traffic forecasts by the tollway agency indicate that widening I-5,

instead of building the Foothill South, produced some of the best results for reducing congestion on the interstate.

During the environmental review process, however, the tollway agency ruled out that option as too costly and difficult to fund.

Toll road officials say that widening I-5 by one and two lanes each way could cost more than \$1 billion and \$2.4 billion, respectively, because hundreds of homes and business would have to be purchased for right of way.

But two studies by Smart Mobility Inc., a Vermont-based transportation consultant hired by opponents of toll road extension, state that traffic growth in South County could be accommodated by improving I-5 and major streets.

Condemnations of private property could be greatly reduced, researchers said, using innovative interchange designs — "measures never considered by TCA."

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