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From the Los Angeles Times

O.C. set to study new end to 55 Freeway

Panel ready to take a \$275,000 look at helping relieve Costa Mesa traffic. A tunnel under Newport Blvd. is among the options.

By David Reyes
Times Staff Writer

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For more than three decades, Costa Mesa has sought help from the county and state to solve its No. 1 traffic dilemma: The uncompleted 55 Freeway that dumps 100,000 vehicles daily onto 19th Street.

Finally, those years of lobbying may have paid off.

On Monday, the Orange County Transportation Authority Board is poised to approve a \$275,000 study to examine alternatives — including tunneling beneath Newport Boulevard — to help relieve congestion.

"Something has to be done," said a frustrated Mayor Allan R. Mansoor, "because traffic comes to a standstill at that location."

If approved, the 14-month study would evaluate alternative routes where the Costa Mesa Freeway turns into Newport Boulevard.

A tunnel or underpass would extend freeway traffic on Newport Boulevard beneath 19th Street nearly a mile west to 17th Street. Other ideas being discussed include street widening and flyovers.

Newport Boulevard became a state route in the 1930s to help workers travel from orange grove to orange grove. It became a four-lane freeway in 1962.

But as the county's population grew, the freeway evolved into a major connector for inland residents heading to Huntington Beach and Newport Beach for relief from broiling temperatures.

Now, with four lanes in each direction, the 55 shares the same distinction as Los Angeles County's 710 Freeway, whose northern terminus also ends at a city street.

For decades, Alhambra has complained about the added congestion from the Long Beach Freeway, which ends at Valley Boulevard. A tunnel also has been proposed to extend the 710 to Pasadena. South Pasadena residents have fought the project because it would destroy homes and bisect their small town.

In Orange County, Costa Mesa's neighbor to the west, Newport Beach, has been a roadblock to the 55's extension.

"It's a very political decision because of right-of-way issues, and if they extend it, it could end up congesting Coast Highway, and that would be a problem as well," said Marian Bergeson, a former Orange County legislator and a state Transportation Commission member who lives in Newport Beach.

Mansoor and other city officials said the opinions of local business owners and residents would be included as part of the study's outreach program.

Mark Miller, 45, a Costa Mesa barbershop owner, said officials were ignoring the safety of those walking across the street. "We need a pedestrian bridge over Newport Boulevard," he said. "That would make it safe for kids and others."

"They've been talking about this tunnel for five years," he said.

For Costa Mesa, finding a solution has been an uphill battle, said City Manager Allan Roeder. For years the city fought Caltrans' efforts to remove an extension of the 55 Freeway from its project list, he said.

The city prevailed, and, in the mid-1990s, it persuaded the state agency to widen the freeway and extend its terminus a quarter mile from Mesa Drive to its present location at 19th Street.

Prior to the 1990s, the freeway's configuration allowed vehicles to exit and cross 19th Street at such high rates of speed that they created a hazard, Roeder said. Several people were being killed there annually, making it the county's second-most dangerous intersection.

While planners were able to slow the traffic, the intersection now is the county's second-most congested.

The city has approved a project to widen Newport Boulevard a lane in each direction near 19th Street.

Work is scheduled to begin this summer and be completed next year.

But with warmer weather approaching, the forecast calls for more traffic. Weekends, the Fourth of July and the opening of the county fair in Costa Mesa a few exits before 19th Street, means traffic snarls, Mansoor said.

Mansoor, whose push to have police enforce federal immigration laws gained nationwide attention, said he knows that tackling the freeway problem won't make him popular.

"Nobody has wanted to touch this, but if you know me, you know I don't mind taking on these big issues, and I feel it needs to be addressed," he said.

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(INFOBOX BELOW)

Freeway study

Costa Mesa has sought help from state and local agencies to alleviate traffic at the end of the Costa Mesa Freeway. The Orange County Transportation Authority will vote on a \$275,000 study to develop alternatives, including a tunnel to extend the freeway.

History of the road

1931: Named Route 43; the road starts at Highway 1, heads north to Anaheim, then east on what is now the Riverside Freeway.

1959: Receives official designation as State Route 55 and becomes the Newport Freeway.

1962-1966: New four-lane highway is built.

1976: Name changes to Costa Mesa Freeway.

1990: Freeway is extended from Interstate 405 to 19th Street.

1999: Carpool lanes and other improvements are added as part of a 3-year improvement project.

Current: The road is five lanes in each direction, including a carpool lane.

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Sources: OCTA, Caltrans

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