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\$1.2 million set for south O.C. traffic study

Transit agency approves funding to find ways to ease Santa Ana Freeway congestion.

By David Reyes
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Orange County transportation planners Monday agreed to fund a study on how to relieve congestion on the Santa Ana Freeway from north of the El Toro Y to San Clemente.

The \$1.2-million study, examining an area where many accidents have occurred — including a recent crash in which a big-rig rear-ended a minivan, killing three children — will be the first major transportation assessment of the southern portion of California's second-most-populous county in two decades, Orange County Transportation Authority officials said.

"That's why we need improvements," said Paul Glaab, a Laguna Niguel councilman and member of OCTA's board, "because stop-and-go traffic increases the potential for rear-end accidents and tragedies."

The area, which includes unincorporated county territory and 14 cities, has undergone major changes during the last 20 years that have placed heavy demands on the freeway and transportation systems, said Kia Mortazavi, OCTA's executive director of development.

Lured, among other things, by newer homes, wider streets and good schools, residents have rapidly moved to South County, creating cities such as Mission Viejo, Aliso Viejo and Laguna Niguel and a population now exceeding half a million. In 1980, 205,000 lived there. By 2030, according to OCTA, the number of miles traveled on South County freeways is expected to have increased 45% from what it was in 2000.

As a result, Glaab and other elected officials say, their constituents have become "painfully aware" of the congestion forecast by experts long ago. "We've already got stop-and-go traffic on the I-5 Freeway now, especially on weekends," Glaab said.

With a proposed Metrolink expansion, improvements to key freeway interchanges and more buses, OCTA's goal is to tie the various transportation systems together to meet traffic needs to 2030, Mortazavi said.

Some improvements along Interstate 5 have already been completed, including a renovation of the El Toro Y, where the 5 and 405 merge. Revamped with 26 freeway lanes in 1997, it's regarded as the nation's widest freeway interchange.

Preliminary plans have identified potential improvements to other key interchanges, including the connection of California 73 in Irvine to Interstate 5 and Avenida Pico in San Clemente.

The new study, planners said, should complete the picture and suggest other improvements.

Community meetings are scheduled for this summer to provide input, OCTA officials said, with preliminary results expected by fall.

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