Traffic moves along Interstate 15 in Corona. A revised project will add toll lanes to the freeway between Highway 60 and Cajalco Road on Corona’s southern edge.

With fewer dollars available to ease traffic gridlock, an agency overseeing transportation projects in Riverside County has scaled back a plan to add new lanes to Interstate 15 by 2020.

Instead of two toll lanes and a general purpose lane running in each direction from Highway 60 near the San Bernardino County line to Highway 74 in Lake Elsinore, the project now will include two toll lanes in each direction from the 60 to Cajalco Road in Corona.

The Riverside County Transportation Commission, made up of elected officials from the county and various cities, approved the change Jan. 31.

Work on the toll lanes is scheduled to begin in 2017 when a project extending toll lanes on Highway 91 from Orange County to I-15 could be finished.
The I-15 toll lanes are scheduled to open by 2020. The plan is to link those lanes with the 91 express lanes so drivers can take the express route from I-15 in Corona directly into Orange County.

By starting on the I-15 toll lanes right after the 91 project wraps up, "(The idea is) to keep the progress moving in terms of increasing capacity on these corridors," said John Standiford, the commission's deputy executive director.

The revised project also recognizes a post-Great Recession reality – there isn’t enough money to fund projects conceived during boom times.

The original I-15 project dates back to 2006. The economic downturn took a bite out of state and federal transportation funding, and from 2006 to 2010, revenue from Measure A, a portion of the sales tax devoted to transportation, fell $45.3 million to $111.8 million, according to a commission staff report.

The original I-15 project would have cost $1.3 billion to build and the general purpose lane would not have been built until 2039, in part because more land on the freeway’s outer edge would have to be acquired and environmental reviews would take longer.

The price tag for the revised project is projected to be $415 million, with $166 million coming from Measure A and $248 million coming from a federal loan and toll-backed bonds.

The commission’s plan to fund the I-15 toll lanes through bonds paid for with toll proceeds also hit a snag. Wall Street’s financial crisis left bond buyers skittish about credit risk, meaning it would cost more for the commission to finance the project with toll-backed bonds, the report read.

The economic downturn also dampened demand from drivers for toll roads, Standiford said. The scaled-down project pencils out better, he added.

The I-15 project isn’t the only one the commission has scaled back in recent years. The Mid-County Parkway was supposed to stretch 32 miles from San Jacinto to Corona.

But the commission cut the route in half in 2009. It now runs from San Jacinto to Interstate 215 in Riverside.
“I think you always start with the biggest goal that you think you can accomplish,” Standiford said. “And as you continue to refine the project through design and engineering (and) you find out about funding, you do have to make adjustments.”

The I-15 toll lanes “(are) an example of that,” he added. “But I also think that although it is somewhat scaled back, it will have a positive impact on congestion on the I-15.”

Carpools likely would be able to use the I-15 toll lanes for free, Standiford said.

Riverside County Supervisor Kevin Jeffries, a commission member whose district includes Lake Elsinore, said he understood the need for changes to the I-15 plan.

“Our focus really needs to be on private sector job creation here in Riverside County so that our residents don’t have to spend hours commuting to and from work everyday,” he wrote in an e-mail.

Lake Elsinore Mayor Bob Magee said the revised project will benefit his city’s residents since they use I-15 to commute to jobs in Riverside and Orange counties.

“I’m thrilled that we’re able to move this forward,” said Magee, a commission member who is also one of Jeffries’ staff members.

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