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State Route 14 project starts: Caltrans begins construction on 4-lane expressway

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Locals travelling Highway 14 may have noticed there's more dust than usual along the corridor.

That's because the California Department of Transportation has started its construction on the State Route 14 - North Mojave Four Lane Project.



Photo by Laura Dobbins

Caltrans held a ground-breaking ceremony April 6 and crews have been working on the ten-mile project. State Route 14 will be converted from a two-lane conventional highway to a four-lane divided expressway.

The operation is part of a long-term goal to make this route safer.

"It's great to finally bring this project to fruition with the assistance of our local partners, Kern Council of Governments, and Kern, Inyo and Mono Counties", said Alan McCuen, acting director, District 6.

Motorists are cautioned to slow down and stay alert while driving past the construction site. There will be a lot of activity as improvements also include the construction of a full grade separated interchange and overpass at the intersection of State Route 14 and California City Boulevard.

Caltrans said they will provide on and off-ramps for northbound and southbound traffic. A loop ramp will also be placed in the northwest quadrant of the interchange for traffic turning south on State Route 14 from westbound California City Boulevard.

Once the project is completed, authorities said they also expect the elimination of road closures due to flooding.

"This project will elevate the roadbed and bridges at Cache Creek Wash and drainage for the entire length of this project will be improved," Caltrans authorities said.

The State Route 14 is just one of several projects the Kern Council of Governments is working on but improving roads is costly. To generate more revenue KCOG is currently pitching a 1/2 cent transportation tax proposed for the November elections.

The new taxes could raise \$900 million for transportation and air quality needs in the San Joaquin Valley. The money would be divided among the nine sub regions within San Joaquin Valley, which includes Ridgecrest. The amount of funding each community would get is based on population and road miles.

Voters also will be given the option to vote on which projects, such as widening existing roadways, paving dirt roads or modifying highways, should be funded.

While most of the money would be earmarked for projects in Bakersfield, the Indian Wells

Valley could receive up to \$44.1 million for nearby highway improvements and of that \$15.9 million would be used for local street upgrades.

Local governments in the past could count on some funding from the state but that no longer is the case, First District Supervisor Jon McQuiston said in an interview last month.

For the past two years, the California Transportation Commission has been forced to stop making new allocations to projects from all three of the major components of the state transportation program: State Transportation Improvement Program, State Highway Operation and Protection Program and Traffic Congestion Relief Program.

"Where the state once had a transportation program funded almost exclusively from user fees, protected by the California Constitution, we now have a program dependent primarily on motor fuel sales taxes, without constitutional protection," said David W. Brewer, California Transportation Commission chief deputy director.

In all, \$2.6 billion in state and local transportation projects that should be ready to go to construction this year but will not for lack of funding, according to a California Transportation Commission report.

McQuiston, who also serves with KCOG, said it's "up to us to resolve," the problem. "And this will have to be done with some type of tax or user fee."

Authorities also have defined the tax initiative in a manner that would allot money to all communities among the nine sub regions within San Joaquin Valley. This means Ridgecrest would get its "fair share," and not be slighted as it had been in past county proposals, McQuiston said.

Here's a look at the projects the tax could fund:

Route 14 - (Route 178 to Red Rock Canyon) widen to four lanes. (\$3.3 million)

Route 395 - S. China Lake Boulevard Interchange. (\$3 million)

College Heights - China Lake Boulevard to Jarvis expansion. (\$5.8 million)

City of Ridgecrest

(\$7.7 million) plus the following money for these city street reconstruction projects:

Upjohn Avenue - Brady to China Lake Boulevard (\$1.8 million)

Downs Street - Upjohn Avenue to Ridgecrest Boulevard (\$775,000)

Norma Street - Las Flores Avenue to Ridgecrest Boulevard (\$375,000)

Norma Street - Bowman Road to South China Lake Boulevard (\$375,000)

Drummond Avenue - Norma Street to China Lake Lake Boulevard (\$245,491)

Richmond Road - Ridgecrest Boulevard to Bowman Road (\$1 million)

County roads in the IWV area - (\$3.7 million)

Another \$16 million would go for air quality projects.