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Ventura County needs to fund fix for Highway 101

When I started driving the Highway 101 corridor 20 years ago, the freeway through Ventura County was a mess.

Traffic slowed to one lane through parts of Oxnard as a left lane merge via flyover cut off traffic every evening. The Santa Clara River bridge was rough and narrow.

The left lane merge in Oxnard is long gone and improvements have been made, including a new and much wider bridge across the Santa Clara River.

But nearly a generation after I earned my road warrior wings, the 101 through Ventura County is jammed up again. Traffic backs up through Ventura and Camarillo every morning and evening. A 20-minute drive across the county in light traffic has become a 40-minute to hour-long ordeal.

And yes, there are still places where the 101 narrows to two lanes — northbound and southbound at the Highway 126 interchange are among the worst examples.

Twice Ventura County voters have turned down a sales tax that would have provided a base of local funding to earn matching federal or state dollars and move Highway 101 improve-

ments up on the priority list. Matching sales tax dollars, for example, are how Santa Barbara County is moving ahead with a \$500 million widening project through Carpinteria and Montecito.

In recent weeks, the Ventura County Transportation Commission has been testing the waters for the development of carpool lanes or HOV lanes from the Highway 23 interchange in Thousand Oaks to the Highway 33 interchange on the west side of Ventura.

Adding additional lanes to those 27 miles would match up with the widening project in Carp as well as a recent upgrade to the 101 coming out of the San Fernando Valley to Route 23.

In a recent email exchange, VCTC Executive Director Darren Kettle said that “even the most affordable” option for adding lanes to the Ventura County corridor would cost an estimated \$800 million — and more if bike lanes or other upgrades were included.

Without a massive federal infrastructure initiative, Ventura County can’t

fund such a project — and without a local sales tax it can’t really compete for state funds. That creates a Catch-22.

“If Ventura County did have a voter approved local transportation sales tax measure those funds would leverage the state and federal transportation dollars so that the ultimate project could be built,” Kettle wrote.

There are many factors at play in the Ventura County transportation dilemma. No-growth politics have stymied the kind of development that might have produced more housing for the workforce at large employers like Haas Automation, Naval Base

Ventura County and CSU Channel Islands.

Ventura County is really designed to be a commuter county and thousands of workers commute to Los Angeles or Santa Barbara to earn their living every day. Reinventing Oxnard, Camarillo, Ventura, Simi Valley and Thousand Oaks as work, live and play communities is beginning to happen, but those

decades-old commuting patterns are hard to change.

And let’s face it, the idea of waking up in Santa Paula or the Ventura beach and being on the set in Burbank or at the office in Beverly Hills in an hour or so is aspirational for every generation of young professionals. Autonomous vehicles will make that lifestyle more — not less — compelling.

Creating a 21st Century Highway 101 has been a dream since the early days of the Business Times, when the last vestiges of the original highway were upgraded and left merge lanes were replaced by something better.

Today, the \$800 million HOV project looms as an urgent need if the county is going to remain competitive. But once that project is done, others, including better mass transit, bike lanes and upgrades to other transportation corridors will move up the priority list.

The time really has come for Ventura County to think about a permanent funding mechanism for its transportation needs — beginning with the HOV project on the 101.

• Contact Editor Henry Dubroff at hdubroff@pacbiztimes.com.



HENRY DUBROFF
Editor

Opinion