



STATE ROUTE 56: GOING GAP

To the surprise of everyone except veterans of the Carmel Valley Planning Board, San Diego's most eagerly awaited east-west freeway connection, SR56 has Gone Gap two years before it opens.

Like the merchandise hawked by the venerable yuppie clothes chain, whose stock has plummeted 75% this quarter because of consumer distaste for icky clothes designs, a new Caltrans study confirms that the six mile SR56 is too expensive and will not fit its most important customers, adults who work.

The Gap in this case refers not only to the obvious empty space on Caltrans maps between SR56 and I-5 headed north at both ends where direct connectors should lie, but between early traffic demand projections suggesting that these connectors are not needed until 2020 and the reality of today's locally generated congestion and tomorrows traffic from approved future development.

Unless city officials who now have fair warning fail to act decisively and quickly to save SR56 from a death by incompletion, thousands of very disappointed peak hour commuters will feel like dumping those elected officials who cut the ribbon July 2004 on top of their municipal bonds.

That is because these poor working stiff's will have plenty of time to grind on the promise of free passage to the west while sitting in queues up to 30 minutes long during peak hours, dripping two-by-metered-two onto I-5 heading south or meandering through endless stop lights on Carmel Valley streets seeking a way to access I-5 to go north.

Part of the reason for the SR56 snafu lies in today's freeway traffic management planning perspective that views SR56 as a rush hour holding pen to keep traffic flowing on I-5, functioning in much the same way as Garnet and other arterial streets connecting communities to freeways.

Caltrans officials tell us that I-5 peak hour congestion is so bad now that the only way to handle new SR56 commuters is to dribble them on in metered doses, which will back traffic up past Carmel Country Road.

Inevitably, intrepid commuters, especially those who want to head north anyway, will exit and aim toward Del Mar Heights Road, running head long into kids navigating to the stupidly proposed, and now even more aptly described, drive-by Solana Beach School District elementary school across from the Del Mar Highlands Town Center.

But, the really big gap meets drivers who wish to head north at El Camino Real, where they must exit, cross several signals and turn right to enter I-5, which yes Virginia, is metered.

Like thirteen other missing freeway-to-freeway moves in the region, SR56 was planned without direct connectors heading north on both ends. The connectors were left out largely because of cost, which when added to the \$140 million already budgeted for the midsection would bring the 6 mile project closer to \$350 million, and the

interesting idea that Carmel Valley streets were master planned to handle both local and new regional traffic spill-over from SR56 until 2020.

Years of flailing and wailing from successive Carmel Valley Planning board chairs beginning at the beginning of Carmel Valley time protesting the use of local streets as regional traffic absorbers, starting with John Dean and subsequently Rob Rauch, went about as far as the sound walls separating SR56 from Carmel Valley.

And then in 1998, voters limited new development between Carmel Valley and Rancho Penasquitos until SR56 was completed, west end connectors and all. Inadvertently, they also said that these smart growth communities would be sprawl growth unless SR56 was completed.

That is because those ballot measures allow construction of less than half the new homes before the connectors are functioning. Without the builder fees generated from the other half, there is no way to fund public amenities like parks and playing fields, libraries and town centers, horse trails and bike paths, forcing those residents to use already overburdened facilities in neighboring communities and to drive the already congested arterials and freeway.

And so at last, Carmel Valley's plight took on regional significance. For the first time, and maybe only time, the area has a chance at salvation before the flood.

This new regional urgency drove the just completed seven month Caltrans Value Analysis Study on the SR56 connector problem, with the participation of the SR56 Task Force, area planning boards and city engineering staff.

The group is recommending a serious program to city officials that could bring a completed direct northbound connector to I-5, city street improvements, and transit options on SR56 within the next six years, and intermediate improvements in time for the SR56 opening.

Ironically, a big obstacle to realizing this plan lies with a few vocal no-growth Carmel Valley dinosaurs with heads firmly in the sand, intent on scuttling Carmel Valley Planning Board approval under the guise of planning purity. In their view, unless both the northbound connector and a massive 70-foot flyover from I-5 south to SR56 east are in the mix, at a surely unfundable cost of \$140 million, the project is no go.

The real no-fly option is a hugely expensive and ugly connector project. Clearly, the intent of the nay-sayers is to stop development east of Carmel Valley, which really means more sprawl since half the homes are already approved and will be built with or without funding for locally serving schools, parks and trails.

With the completion of the SR56 connector Caltrans study, city and regional officials have a two-year wake-up call to fix the problem before SR56 opens for business. Doing nothing is Going Gap in a big way—SR56 is already expensive, and it will really look bad without serious redesign.