



MY BEST SHOT

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LONG AND WINDING ROAD TO STATE ROUTE 56

By now, sleepy heads on both ends of the future SR56 will have popped out of the sand. On Monday, Carmel Valley's worst nightmare, the Black Mountain Road loop connecting Rancho Penasquitos to the west end of SR56, opened months before expected, with consequences likely to cause more tantrums in Rancho Penasquitos and Carmel Valley and thumb sucking by transportation planners than we've seen in years.

That's because 20,000 drivers seeking their way west will soon discover a) their long-awaited connection to I-5 cannot handle the traffic, b) Del Mar Heights Road, the 6-lane straight shot to I-5 is closed, and c) the only way to head north onto I-5 from SR56 is to exit into a traffic mess at Carmel Valley Road. These commuters are surely grumpy bears.

For those living in tranquil denial, the Black Mountain loop road is the dangerous pothole filled two-laner that until Monday stopped and started at an unpatrolled dirt road, fondly known as Blood Alley, near Evergreen Nursery. While developer Taylor Woodrow builds out the road to four lanes as a requirement of their Black Mountain Ranch project, the improved east end opened all the way to I-15, the dirt road is gone and cars are pouring, more likely oozing, onto SR56 on the west through several construction detours.

The road opened now because over the summer, a new tract mansion development filled up with families who, oddly enough, did not feel safe ferrying their kids to school on a dangerous dirt road. How is that for phased transportation planning? And, wrangling between Taylor Woodrow, property owners in the SR56 right of way, and Caltrans over how to build the connection to SR56, and a futile Caltrans attempt to open Del Mar Heights instead, delayed the road improvements for almost a year.

That's right—Caltrans officials tried their ever-loving best to make Del Mar Heights Road the de facto SR56 and turn Carmel Valley collector streets into on-ramps. Councilman Harry Mathis, known for honoring commitments under fire, said "no way" in spite of heavy pressure from Rancho Penasquitos activists.

Del Mar Heights Road is closed because of a provision in 1998's Proposition M ballot measure that closes the street until the middle section of SR56 is finished. The Carmel Valley Planning Board members who wrote this into law wanted to make sure that the traffic consequences of SR56 delays would not fall on Carmel Valley neighborhoods.

Because of lawsuits, funding gaps and environmental regulations, SR56 will open in mid-2004, three years later than promised, and what was once thought a short-term inconvenience is now a three-year ordeal. Soon, we are likely to see some interesting body language directed toward the gates of Rancho Glens Estates, where homeowners who filed the lawsuit challenging the SR56 alignment sit hostage to the traffic jams they helped create.

SR56 is now flush and on track, which brings us to the last roadway imbroglio—the missing northbound connectors at I-5. Caltrans officials and many at SANDAG insist, as they have since the beginning of time, that direct connectors from SR56 are unnecessary until 2020. As regional agencies, their interest stops at the heads and tails of metered access ramps.

After all, these are the agencies that failed to build fourteen other direct connectors around the county. The prevailing view is that sacrificing costly connectors causes a little commuter inconvenience and only rains on the parade of local communities—like the very real possibility that crafty commuters wanting to head north will leave SR56 at Carmel Country and Carmel Creek Roads, with Carmel Creek Elementary School sitting at ground zero where the two streets meet.

And so, boys and girls, wake up and smell your mocha java latte. While regional transportation planners at SANDAG look the other way, 20,000 commuters from Rancho Penasquitos will be storming the barricade at Del Mar Heights Road. And, while many of them slog through Carmel Valley trying to head north, Caltrans will be telling us they will not be completing SR56 in Carmel Valley until 2020. Let the games begin.