

ORANGE COUNTY
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91 Freeway: too many cars, too little cash

By Cheryl Downey
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Lured by a higher-paying job in Orange County, Riverside resident Pat Larkin reluctantly eased her car back into the nightmarish commuter crawl along the Riverside (91) Freeway this month.

She leaves home at 4:30 a.m., creeps along the 91 with thousands of other early-morning commuters and arrives at her Santa Ana job by 6 a.m. Already frustrated, she's looking for a car-pool partner, wishing for mass transit and fuming at transportation officials.

"They haven't done anything to

the 91," Larkin said. "They don't need expensive consultants to tell them what to do. I'll tell them for free: Put in a car-pool lane and another lane. Talk does nothing. Do something."

Talk may be cheap. But widening the 91, adding car-pool lanes, putting in a commuter-rail system, building new alternate roads is expensive.

County transportation officials say they know exactly what to do to improve the county's most congested freeway. They just don't know how to foot the bill — easily several hundred million dollars.

New county projections show

that in 20 years, 400,000 cars a day might try to cram their way onto the Riverside Freeway, the major link between jobs in Orange County and less expensive housing in Riverside County. That is twice the freeway's capacity.

"This is how bad it could be," said Ken R. Smith, the county Environmental Management Agency's transportation director. "But it's not how bad it has to be. It's giving us 20 years to try to make things better than what we're projecting here."

Commuters can't imagine the 91 getting worse.

"The 91 is a fiasco. It's horren-

dous," said Tom Shores, a Corona Hills resident who commutes to Costa Mesa. "It's like a parking lot."

Riverside Freeway traffic has doubled in eight years, soaring from 105,000 cars a day in 1980 to 201,000 cars a day in 1988, according to counts by the state Department of Transportation.

During rush hour, 14,500 cars an hour are trying to use a freeway designed for 10,000, while many other drivers are on Santa Ana Canyon and other side streets seeking a way around the congestion, said Joe El-Harake, who keeps

Please see FREEWAY/9

FREEWAY: Widening, adding lanes costly

FROM 1

traffic statistics for Caltrans.

On the other side of the county line, Corona on-ramps are so backed up it can take residents 30 to 45 minutes to get on the 91 freeway. Riverside Freeway traffic comes to a halt there, which is why jaded commuters refer to the freeway drive as "the Corona crawl."

"The improvements are needed today," said Stan Oftelie, executive director of the Orange County Transportation Commission.

Jack Reagan, executive director of the Riverside County Transportation Commission, stressed that both counties must work to get jobs in Riverside County and affordable housing in Orange County so that so many people don't have to live in one place and work in another.

But the counties also must create more capacity by widening the freeway, creating commuter rail lines and convincing more people to leave their cars at home, Reagan said.

Both counties are interested in a commuter train along the 91. One study projected that such a rail line quickly could attract nearly 5,000 riders a day. The idea is being studied further.

San Bernardino County officials are studying building new roads that would link the Corona (71) Expressway with Orange County north of the Riverside Freeway. Both roads — Soquel Canyon Road and Tonner Canyon Road — also have been pitched as possible private toll roads.

But Riverside and Orange counties are putting a high priority on the widening of the 91.

Orange County's freeway-widening project — adding one to two car-pool lanes in each direction from county line to county line — will be designed and ready to build

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enough money in about a year to pay for widening the freeway from the Orange (57) Freeway to the Riverside County line.

Orange County Transportation Commissioner Dana Reed recently came up with another way to raise money for the Riverside (91) Freeway widening.

While driving 2 mph on the Riverside Freeway, Reed called Stan Oftelie, Orange County Transportation Commission executive director, on his car phone to suggest turning the 91 into a temporary toll road.

For one year, Reed suggested, charge drivers \$1 per round trip and start widening the freeway immediately. The toll on 200,000 cars a day could raise

Oftelie and his Riverside County counterpart, Jack Reagan, were skeptical.

Turning an existing road into a toll road might be barred by federal legislation, Oftelie said.

Reagan said demonstration toll-road projects are approved only if there is a free, alternate route — and there is no alternate to the 91.

"If he wants to see another American Revolution, that proposal would do it," OC Supervisor Don Roth said.

by 1991. The only hitch is raising the \$200 million to \$300 million needed for it, Oftelie said.

An estimated \$400 million to widen and improve the 91 through Orange County was lost when a local sales tax increase measure failed in November.

Riverside County passed such a sales-tax measure in November 1988. It has money to pay for one car-pool lane in each direction from Riverside to the county line and plans to begin awarding contracts in June.

It is possible those new lanes will stop dead at the Orange County line, though both counties are trying to ensure that doesn't happen. Oftelie asked Riverside County officials to consider lending Orange County money for its 91 widening project, but Riverside County officials are skeptical.

Orange County transportation planners will spend \$1 million to \$2 million in local money getting the Riverside Freeway project designed and ready for construction. Then they will try to get it in line to receive state and federal funding in 1996 or 1997, money the state will have only if the proposed statewide gas-tax increase goes through in June, Oftelie said.

Oftelie suggested Riverside County officials front the money for the Orange County project, then get paid back when state funding comes through in 1996 or 1997.

Reagan said that proposal faces "tough sledding."

"My commissioners have their doubts about whether that would be a good idea or whether they would want to do it without asking Riverside County voters first," Reagan said.