

Forests and Trees December 2010

Dear Editor,

Sometimes we become so fixated on individual trees that we lose all track of the larger forest. This year, the Montecito Journal featured excellent articles and spirited letters about traffic on Coast Village, the challenges of navigating a roundabout, and a schoolchildren's path along San Ysidro Road. All important neighbor issues, for those involved. But shouldn't we extend our thinking beyond the immediate to the larger community?

What if the next phases of Caltrans' Highway 101 widening involved the removal of most of the landscape between Hot Springs and Sheffield Drive? What if freeway lanes, sound walls and median dividers kept growing, but state and local funds for aesthetics and landscaping disappeared? What if our coastal highway became a LA-style concrete channel?

Impossible? Don't be so sure.

Many of the warnings from our dear late friend, Barry Siegel, are rapidly, quietly becoming reality. A brilliant aerospace analyst, a Montecito Association lion on traffic planning issues, Siegel worried that the suite of "101 operational improvements" could easily morph into "full widening" before either the Santa Barbara County Association of Governments (SBCAG) or Caltrans knew whether those projects had actually solved our most pressing congestion and safety issues.

Almost twenty years ago Caltrans first proposed to "improve" Highway 101 between Santa Barbara and the Rincon. Everyone who saw the computer simulations of what Caltrans wanted to build here was shocked. A group of individuals came together – eventually thousands of us – to form Grassroots 101 and follow SBCAG from meeting to meeting, from town to town until they finally began listening to this community's concerns.

Under the leadership of Naomi Schwartz, SBCAG and Caltrans changed course and redirected their efforts to improve the 101 *corridor* (not just the freeway mainline) including North Jameson Lane, Ortega Hill, Summerland streetscape and the link from Coast Village Road to East Beach. At the same time Design Guidelines for future freeway expansion were enacted and real efforts began at the regional level to reduce traffic growth by improving commuter services. Coastal rail was within reach!

That extraordinary effort in the early 1990's protected the scenic highway and kept gigantic freeway exchanges away. With the immediate work done, all sense of urgency in Montecito died down. Not for Barry Siegel; he stayed in the trenches and helped to organize the non-profit

Coalition for Sustainable Transportation (COAST) so that threats like that one to our quality of life would not surface.

Much has changed since then. While South Coast residents are distracted by the economy, foreign wars and the stress of everyday life, Caltrans and SBCAG are again advancing design ideas that many thought were dead. With funds disappearing fast, SBCAG is now talking about building “a freeway that we can afford”...

Terms like “the gateway” to this or that are overused much too often BUT... Can anyone doubt that the scenic coastal parkway through Montecito that brings people from Ventura along the ocean into the South Coast is the true gateway to our area?

Barry Siegel is no longer here to help protect our area, but COAST is. If you value the ambience of our area, or how public revenues are used, you should get involved before it is too late.

Alex Pujo, President
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