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Widened Highway 76 open from I-5 to I-15

By Joe Naiman on May 26, 2017



Dignitaries celebrate the grand opening of the newly completed SR-76 by planting a variety of native and drought resistant plants that will be used to landscape the areas lining the highway. Shane Gibson photos

State Route 76 is now two lanes in each direction between Interstate 5 and Interstate 15.

A grand opening ceremony to celebrate the completion of the final phase between South Mission Road and I-15 was held May 16 near the intersection of the old alignment, which is now an access road off the freeway, with Sage Road. Because the highway was already open to traffic, the ribbon-cutting ceremony was replaced by the planting of drought-tolerant shrubs which will be used to landscape the area.

“Today we celebrate the end of a journey about two decades in the making,” said California Department of Transportation District 11 director Laurie Berman. “This is a high-priority project not just in the region but statewide as well.”

The California Streets and Highways Code designated state routes to be part of the state’s freeway or expressway system in 1959, and State Route 76 between Interstate 5 and Interstate 15 was one of those roads. In the November 1987 election, the county’s voters approved the

half-cent TransNet sales tax for transportation, and the widening of Highway 76 between I-5 and Melrose Drive in Oceanside utilized TransNet revenue. In November 2004 the voters approved a 40-year extension of the TransNet sales tax through 2048.

"This is a milestone," said County Supervisor Ron Roberts, who is also currently the chair of the San Diego Association of Governments board. "Today we're delivering on a promise to the people of the entire community."

The portion of the widened State Route 76 between Interstate 5 and Melrose Drive in Oceanside was completed in 1999. The widening between Melrose Drive and South Mission Road was completed in 2012. Improvements on the interchange at State Route 76 and Interstate 15 opened to traffic in August 2013.

"This is a critical, critical piece," Roberts said of the most recent expansion project.

The dedication ceremony occurred four weeks after the death of Jacob Dekema, who was the Caltrans District 11 director from 1955 to 1980. Dekema passed away April 16 at the age of 101, and he called the widening of Highway 76 one of the three uncompleted projects he had envisioned. "This project fulfills a dream expressed long ago," Berman said.

"State Route 76 from the coast to I-15 is now a modern four-lane highway," Berman said. "The birth of a better roadway is always something to celebrate."

The project widened Highway 76 from 30 feet on average to 44 feet of paved surface which provided two travel lanes 12 feet wide along with inside and outside shoulder lanes 10 feet wide. The road also includes turn lanes, acceleration and deceleration lanes, and barriers.

Bicycle lanes are part of the widened road. "It will make life better for them (bicyclists), too," Roberts said.

"It's part of a network that we're creating," Roberts said. "This is going to give everybody an opportunity to get to their destinations a little easier."

The work also includes improvements to the park-and-ride on the northwest corner of Highway 76 and Old Highway 395. In addition to enlarging the park-and-ride, the improvements also include flattening the grade, adding truck parking and a bus terminal, lighting, and charging stations for electric vehicles.

Work began on cutting the slope in 2015 and blasting to dissolve rock occurred during 2016. The paving, striping, and charging station are the remaining tasks for the park-and-ride improvements, and the new park-and-ride is expected to open to the public in mid-June.

"The modernization of State Route 76 features a number of innovations," Berman said.

The new Highway 76 also includes bioswales and wildlife undercrossings.

"The environmental mitigation has become a national model," said Doreen Stadtlander, who is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service division chief for unincorporated San Diego County and tribal lands.

"We have an impressive array of innovative environmental features," Berman said. "We are leaving the natural environment in a better condition than we found it."

Caltrans worked with the county to coordinate the highway expansion with the county's plans for the future San Luis Rey River Park, and the environmental mitigation for State Route 76 includes provision of land for the river park. Berman noted that the scientific community as well as the Fallbrook and Bonsall communities provided input for the design of the expanded road.

"Participation from the community is so vital," Berman said.

The current traffic volume along State Route 76 between South Mission Road and Interstate 15 is 20,000 average daily trips. The volume is expected to increase to 46,000 average daily trips by 2030.

"It will now be able to efficiently handle this increased traffic," Berman said.

A traffic signal was added at the intersection of Highway 76 and Via Monserate, and all driveways and street intersections accessible from Highway 76 were renovated.

The work also removed "palisades", the term for the pipes with webbing initially erected to control the flow of the San Luis Rey River and protect the road from erosion. The riprap within slopes was either abandoned in place or re-used.

The tasks also included relocation of electric, telephone, and cable utility lines and Rainbow Municipal Water District water and sewer pipelines.

"It's been a hard project," Berman said. "Not all of it was easy. But we all came together and figured out how to solve big problems."

The \$201.7 million project between South Mission Road and I-15 utilized \$90.9 million of federal funding, \$60.6 million of revenue from TransNet, \$27.4 million of state Proposition 1B funding, and \$23.0 million of developer and other local funding.

The portion between Melrose Drive and South Mission Road had a \$151.8 million cost which was covered by \$91.5 million of federal funding including \$76.6 million from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act stimulus program, \$60.0 million of TransNet funding, and \$346,000 of local contributions.

"It's exciting to see a collaborative project like this come to fruition," said Federal Highway Administration associate division administrator Monica Gourdine.

"There's a lot of people who are responsible and played a key role in its completion," Roberts said.

Roberts noted the support of Congressman Darrell Issa in providing federal funding for Highway 76. "He's been very cooperative with us," Roberts said.

Bill and Kathy Horn were celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary May 16 so Horn, who is the county supervisor representing the communities served by State Route 76, was unable to

attend the ceremony. Roberts noted that Highway 76 serves Oceanside, Vista, Bonsall, and Fallbrook.

"Residents from all of these communities are going to enjoy these improvements," Roberts said.

Roberts also noted the role of Caltrans in providing land for the future San Luis Rey River Park. "It's going to represent another shining example of a regional park," he said.

In April 2014, bids for the widening of Highway 76 from South Mission Road to Interstate 15 were advertised. Seven bids were submitted for the project. The bids were opened in June 2014, and Ames Construction of Corona submitted the low bid of \$75.2 million.

Due to environmental constraints based on habitat breeding seasons, vegetation clearing and pile driving were allowed only between mid-September and mid-February. River flow issues required any work within the river to be performed between May and October. Construction on the bridge over Live Oak Creek began in 2015.

The new road between South Mission Road and I-15 is elevated approximately six to eight feet above the old highway. The embankments required approximately 900,000 cubic yards of fill.

"All of the slopes will be native plants," said Caltrans project manager Karen Jewel. "I think that represents the commitment to the environment."

The initial work took place on the southern part of the road between South Mission Road and Gird Road, and the hauling of that fill was followed by paving a road on top of that fill which allowed all traffic to move to what eventually became the eastbound lanes while work was being done on the eventual westbound lanes. Traffic was moved to the two new lanes in August 2016. Westbound traffic between Interstate 15 and South Mission Road was moved from what is now the northern eastbound lane to two westbound lanes in March 2017.

The park-and-ride and planting tasks are still to be done, but those do not preclude the use of two travel lanes in each direction.

"It's a particularly sweet day for me," Roberts said. "This is a very important link and this has been on our to-do list for many years."

"It think it's just an exciting day to have the roadway open," Jewel said. "This is going to be a much safer roadway for the traveling public as they come through this area."