

Final phase of Route 76 project starting soon

The three-year construction project will create a four-lane highway between I-5 and I-15

By **J. HARRY JONES**
Reporter

BONSALL — Motorists traveling State Route 76 just west of Interstate 15 will soon see work begin on the final phase of a massive improvement that, when complete, will have reshaped the winding two-lane highway into a four-lane thoroughfare from the 15 to Interstate 5.

In mid-August the state's attorney approved a contract with Corona-based Ames Construction Co. to finish the last 4-mile segment of the years-long project. Within the next few weeks, the company will establish a base headquarters about a half-mile west of I-15 and start moving heavy equipment to the site.

It will be three years before the final segment of the highway — from South Mission Road in Bonsall to Old Highway 395 just west of I-15 — is finished, but officials say it will be worth the wait.

"Motorists will have a very up-to-date and current regional facility up there," said Carl Savage, project manager for the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans).

"Effectively, the roadway geometry and standards will be continuous all the way between Interstate 5 and Interstate 15," he said. "The nature of the roadway that you get on at I-5 will be the same all the way over to I-15 — unlike what it does now when it changes about half way along and goes to a more rural, windier road."

The first phase of the project, converting Route 76 into a four-lane highway through much of Oceanside, was completed in 1999. The second phase,

stretching from Melrose Drive to south Mission Road, was finished in 2012 at a cost of about \$171 million.

The cost of the final phase of improvements, including the reconfiguration of the I-15/Route 76 interchange which was completed last year, is roughly \$200 million.

Route 76 is a vital artery linking coastal North County to inland communities, including Southwest Riverside County. As the population has grown, traffic on the two-lane road has skyrocketed.

About 30,000 vehicles travel the road daily between I-5 and I-15, a figure expected to double by 2030.

In a sense, work really began on the final leg of the project in January and February when Caltrans crews came in and started chopping down vast amounts of trees and brush where the highway will be built.

Savage said the clearing work was done for two reasons. Environmental restrictions to protect wildlife such as nesting birds in part dictated the timing, and the clearing was needed to explain better to potential construction bidders what the project entailed.

"We needed to let the contractors who were bidding on the work see where the work was," Savage said. "Prior to that it was very thick, very dense, and all you could really say is 'over there, beyond the bushes.' We took the opportunity to clear all that out when we could."

The final phase of the project will also include the expansion of the Park & Ride at the intersection of the highway and I-15, where Nussy Burger once sat. The popular burger joint was relocated a couple years ago just to the north off Old Highway 395. The lot will double in size, Savage said.

Throughout the last decade, Caltrans



A transient walks along state Route 76 just west of Interstate 15 on Friday. The narrow highway will be widened soon.

Photo: J. Harry Jones

has been working closely with the county, which has been buying land and slowly developing a river park along the banks of the San Luis Rey River near the highway.

The regional park one day will be a 1,700-acre, 9-mile long park beginning in Oceanside in the westernmost portion and ending near I-15. The dream is to offer active and passive recreational opportunities along 20 miles of trails while at the same time preserving the San Luis Rey River corridor.

"We meet with the county regularly," Savage said. "Some property that we own up there, the county would like to incorporate into their park. And property they own we are in need of to build our highway. We've been working very successfully with them through all three of these phases."

As for the highway, Savage said when it is finally completed motorists should be happy.

"They will end up with a much more consistent facility with a much safer and efficient way to travel," he said. "And hopefully everyone will love it."

© Copyright 2014 The San Diego Union-Tribune, LLC.
An MLIM LLC Company. All rights reserved.