

The San Diego Union-Tribune.

Union-Tribune Editorial

The county's environmentally friendly highway

September 18, 2003

Many people today don't remember what traffic was like in Santee and the Mission Gorge area before the eastern extension of state Route 52 was completed a decade ago.

Overnight, severe traffic congestion on Mission Gorge Road from Santee to Interstate 8 decreased as commuters began using the faster route out of town. Sometimes, a new road can make all the difference in the world.

State Route 125 from East County to the South Bay will create an even more dramatic transformation. Construction work was finally begun on the last leg of this important highway earlier this month. Despite all the delays created by opponents of this project, once this north-south route is completed, residents – particularly those of eastern Chula Vista – won't know how they got along without it for so many years. Like the vanishing traffic on Mission Gorge Road through San Carlos and Allied Gardens, congestion on the east-west arterial roads in Chula Vista will greatly decrease.

The opponents of SR 125 must be given their due, however. This road, when completed, will be one of the most environmentally friendly highways in the country. The northern portion already has a scenic designation from Caltrans for its views of Cowles Mountain, Mt. Helix, Dictionary Hill and San Miguel Mountain. The southern portions of the project include about 1,000 acres of natural habitat preservation, restoration of wetlands in the Sweetwater and Otay river valleys, wildlife corridors protected by bridge spans, along with six new baseball fields and significant improvements to parkland near Sweetwater Reservoir. Landscaping will be extensive, and bridges were designed for aesthetics as well as function. And finally, the developer of the toll road paid off opponents \$3 million for other environmental preservation to end their opposition once and for all. Continued next page.

Some might call it blackmail. Others will say the preservation groups did a good job securing environmental and recreational benefits for the South Bay. Either way, when this highway is finished, it will be a true parkway. Not only will it be environmentally friendly, but it will look very nice, too.

SR 125 will link up parts of the region that have been separated by lack of access. Getting from East County to South County is a tiring drive through traffic on SR 94 and then down Interstate 805. With the new highway, La Mesa and Chula Vista will practically be neighbors, maybe a 15 minute drive apart. Meanwhile, driving time from Chula Vista to Otay Mesa will be cut by 75 percent.

This is important because the employment centers in eastern Chula Vista and Otay Mesa are growing rapidly. Right now, commuting to or from these areas to either East County or San Diego is very difficult. It will become much easier with SR 125.

Now that the new eastern highway is completely under way, South Bay residents concerned about transportation should turn their attention to the Metropolitan Transit Development Board's plans for the trolley extension, or whatever type of mass transit will be built on the right-of-way through Otay Ranch and down to the border. Meanwhile, commuter bus routes also are being realigned through the South Bay. By decade's end, the roadways will be completed to help accommodate the area's huge growth rate. Mass transit, however, is still on the drawing boards.