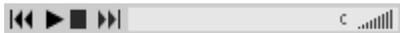




Inland News

San Jacinto lays out Highway 79 improvement plan



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By STEVE FETBRANDT
The Press-Enterprise

SAN JACINTO - More than five miles of Highway 79 through the heart of San Jacinto will soon get \$5.3 million worth of upgrades, including new and improved traffic signals, sidewalks and uniform signage under a deal the city cut with the state.

City officials worked with Caltrans and the Legislature to get a bill passed that will allow the state to relinquish control of the highway to the city.

The California Transportation Commission authorized the transfer of seven miles of the highway on July 27.

The state-designated course of Highway 79 covers several streets with local names within the city limits. The section turned over to San Jacinto begins on the north end of town just east of Sanderson Avenue and stretches along Ramona Expressway until it intersects with State Street. Highway 79 continues south along State Street, then turns southeast along Ramona Boulevard and then south onto San Jacinto Avenue at the five-point Main Street intersection.

The city-controlled section ends at the southern city limit where San Jacinto Avenue hits Menlo Avenue.

As part of the transfer, the state also agreed to pay San Jacinto \$5.3 million to bring the highway to "a state of good repair."

"For a long time, they (Caltrans) weren't doing what they should have been doing all along," Mayor Jim Ayres said. "They should have been doing repaving, graffiti- and weed-abatement and uniform street signage. Road maintenance in general just lacked.

"We've been spending close to \$3 million a year on road improvements for probably the last five years from a variety of funding sources, including Measure A gas-tax funds, some general funds and redevelopment agency money. Whenever you can get it done on someone else's nickel, you should take

advantage of that."

Caltrans Maintenance

Ayres said Caltrans did a 2-inch asphalt overlay on the highway between Sanderson Avenue and the Five Points intersection about four years ago, but nothing significant since then.

Caltrans spokeswoman Shelli Lombardo said she was not able to determine Caltrans' maintenance record on Highway 79 through San Jacinto, but said the agency does the best it can with its limited funding.

"Under the statewide regional transportation plan, we only get X number of dollars," Lombardo said. "Whether it's Northern or Southern California, the money is used to improve or correct routes where the need is the greatest. If we're moving 300,000 cars on one freeway and 20,000 on a state route, because the money in the fund is so limited, it will go where it will do the most good."

Ayres said, "A generation has gone by where kids have walked on dirt instead of sidewalks they should have put in, which we will now do."

Making it Better

Assistant City Engineer Eric Skaugset said in a staff report that the proposed projects focus mainly on the older, developed part of the city where road improvements are not likely to be included in future development.

Ayres said the money comes at a good time because the city is bursting with traffic.

"We're suffocating," he said. "This should have been done years ago, but the mechanism for funding it just wasn't there."

Ayres said the 15 proposed projects cover all of the major needs along the route and include some special safety measures such as a landscaped median strip along Ramona Boulevard to prevent motorists from making U-turns and cutting across the street.

The most pressing project, he said, is installation of traffic signals at State Street/Idyllwild Drive and Tiger Lane/Ramona Boulevard because of traffic from San Jacinto High School, which is on Idyllwild near Tiger Lane.

"The high school's enrollment is pushing 2,500 kids," Ayres said. "If we don't provide some kind of organization around that school, it will be a free-for-all."

The city presented a traffic-control plan to the San Jacinto Unified School District several weeks ago and the school board agrees with the need for signals at those two intersections, Ayres said.

Ayres said the new traffic signals will be synchronized and signals at San Jacinto Avenue and Seventh Street will have left-turn arrows added, as will the ones at Ramona Boulevard and State Street.

"In essence, we're getting two brand-new signals and two more with modifications," he said. "I can't remember another time we've installed that many signals and had that much improvement. It would take a long time to save up \$5.3 million to do this much work."

Other Projects

Also planned under separate funding is a traffic signal at Santa Fe and Esplanade Avenue and one at Lyon Road (formerly Potter Road) and Ramona Expressway (Highway 79). Funding for these, estimated at \$250,000 per signal, is coming from a consortium of developers.

The city also intends to make Idyllwild Drive between State Street and Tiger Lane a one-way street under separate funding. That work is expected to start in June.

Ayres said the school district requested the one-way street because of all of the pedestrian and vehicular traffic around the school and the expansion of the high school.

A significant portion of the Highway 79 work will be put out for bidding in October and construction should start in November.

"Grind-and-overlay work doesn't require a whole lot of engineering," Ayres said. "Sidewalks up and down San Jacinto Avenue also have minimal engineering required. The whole package should be completed -- worst-case scenario -- by September of next year."

Ayres asked residents to bear with the city during construction.

"When they see the progress, they'll be happy with it," he said.

Another benefit to owning the road is that the city no longer has to apply for encroachment permits from Caltrans to do work along the right-of-way or just to hold a parade.

"We have local control over the access and it will be up to us to manage it well," he said.

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Extensive Road upgrades planned for san Jacinto

The state has given San Jacinto \$5.3 million to make improvements to a portion of Highway 79 that was recently transferred to the city's control. Following is a summary of the work to be done:

Project 1 - Add eastbound and westbound turn pockets on Ramona Expressway (Highway 79) at Chase Street. Install pedestrian ramps on south side of expressway and improved traffic signal. Estimated cost: \$300,000.

Project 2 - Grind and overlay pavement on State Street (Highway 79) from Ramona Expressway to Ramona Boulevard. Restripe road to make a continuous left-turn lane and reconstruct right-turn pocket from expressway onto State Street in front of Chevron gas station. Estimated cost: \$650,000.

Project 3 - Install traffic signal at State Street (Highway 79) and the realigned Idyllwild Drive. Estimated cost: \$200,000.

Project 4 - Restripe intersection of Ramona Boulevard and State Street with longer left-turn pockets along Ramona Boulevard and add left-turn arrow. Estimated cost: \$100,000.

Project 5 - Grind and overlay pavement on Ramona Boulevard (Highway 79) from State Street to San Jacinto Avenue at deteriorated locations. Restripe road. Estimated cost: \$450,000.

Project 6 - Construct curbs, gutters and sidewalk along Ramona Boulevard (Highway 79) from State Street to San Jacinto Avenue where needed. Complete minor widening of Ramona Boulevard where necessary to join new curbs and gutters. Remove berm along San Jacinto High School frontage and install curbs and gutters. Estimated cost: \$350,000.

Project 7 - Construct landscaped median along Ramona Boulevard (Highway 79) where road width is adequate from State Street to Grand Army Avenue. Median will have breaks at all intersections and major driveways. Typical section would have one vehicle lane in each direction, one bike lane in each direction and median. Estimated cost: \$750,000.

Project 8 - Install new traffic signal at Ramona Boulevard (Highway 79) and Tiger Lane, and add turn pockets in all directions. Estimated cost: \$200,000.

Project 9 - Improve crossings on Ramona Boulevard in front of San Jacinto Elementary and Monte Vista Middle schools. Possibilities include raised crossing, use of brick pavers or flashing lights. Estimated cost: \$150,000.

Project 10 - Improve intersection of Ramona Boulevard and Estudillo/Second streets to provide attractive entrance to downtown area and Veteran's Memorial at Druding Park. Estimated cost: \$250,000.

Project 11 - Improve pavement on San Jacinto Avenue (Highway 79) between Main and Seventh streets. Estimated cost: \$350,000.

Project 12 - Construct curbs, gutters and sidewalks along San Jacinto Avenue (Highway 79) between Main Street and Esplanade Avenue. Estimated cost: \$350,000.

Project 13 - Replace traffic signal to provide protected left turns in all directions at San Jacinto Avenue (Highway 79) and Seventh Street. Redo pedestrian ramps to meet Americans with Disabilities Act requirements. Estimated cost: \$250,000.

Project 14 - Construct curbs, gutters and sidewalks along San Jacinto Avenue (Highway 79) between Esplanade and Menlo avenues. Estimated cost: \$700,000.

Project 15 - Improve traffic signals along entire route. Modifications would typically include installation of battery backup, adding light emitting diode signal heads and retiming signals. Estimated cost: \$250,000.
