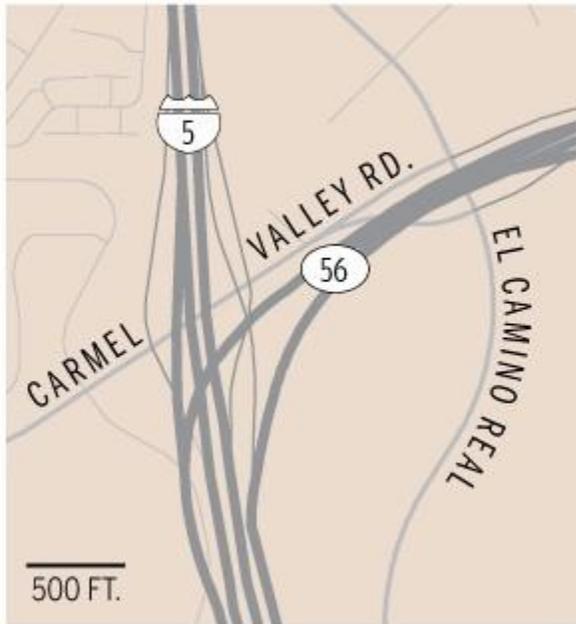


TRANSPORTATION: Options detailed for

I-5, HIGHWAY 56 INTERCHANGE



NCT

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Public forum on I-5/56 interchange

Caltrans will host a public forum June 13 on the Highway 56 and I-5 interchange improvement plans.

It's scheduled for 6 p.m. at Del Mar Hills Academy, 14085 Mango Drive.

Members of the public have 45 days to provide comments on the improvement options. Emails can be sent to I-5_SR_56_Interchange_Draft_EIR_EIS@dot.ca.gov. Letters can be addressed to Shay Lynn Harrison, Chief Environmental Analyst, Caltrans, District 11, 4050 Taylor Street, San Diego, CA 92110.

All comments must be received by July 2, 2012.

For motorists who use the interchange of Highway 56 and Interstate 5 near Del Mar, the days of idling at red lights before merging between freeways won't end anytime soon.

But improvement plans are at least inching forward ---- and faster than plans to add connectors further north at Oceanside's notorious stop-light interchange, at westbound Highway 78 West and southbound Interstate 5.

The California Department of Transportation on Friday released several options for solving the Del Mar area connection crunch, one of which the agency expects to choose later this year ---- but not start building until 2020 at the earliest.

The choices are part of Caltrans' draft environmental impact report on the project.

Improvement options, ranging in cost from \$95 million to \$270 million, include:

- Building two elevated connector ramps between the freeways;
- Building new merging lanes along 56 and 5, but no elevated connectors;
- Two similar proposals calling for just one elevated ramp and new merging lanes.

Caltrans is also considering a "no build" choice. The agency rarely selects such an option.

Allan Kosup, Caltrans' I-5 corridor director, said Friday the agency narrowed more than 17 options down to five through a decade-long "big balancing act" of working with the public.

"It's been a lot of work with the communities to get to this point," he said by phone. "It's been an interactive process."

Residents expressed worries about everything from mammoth concrete fly-over ramps blocking their coastal views to "canyon-effect" noise, to the possible loss of property, said Dennis Ridz, chairman of the Torrey Pines Community Planning Board.

"There's still major objections, at least with people on the west side (of Interstate 5)," Ridz added.

Private gated communities sit atop coastal bluffs west of the interchange; modern business parks and hotels are situated to its east.

Construction on the Oceanside interchange isn't scheduled to start until 2035, though North County leaders have said they were pushing to move that date up.

Kosup said the phasing of the multi-billion dollar I-5 expansion (planned from Del Mar to Camp Pendleton) accounts for why the Del Mar area interchange is planned a few years ahead of the connector project in Oceanside.

The expansion project calls for adding four new express lanes down the middle of I-5. They would be open to carpools, buses and fee-paying solo-drivers, with construction starting as early as 2013.

Caltrans hopes to start the expansion of I-5 in the south, and at the same time work on the Del Mar-area interchange improvements, he said.

Doing so is "more cost-effective and has less impact to the community," Kossup said.

Rather than consecutively build two large construction projects along I-5 in Oceanside (an interchange expansion and then shortly after a freeway widening), Kossup said the best move is to do it all at once.

"You don't want to be in the lagoons twice," he said, referring to environmental concerns along the corridor.