

## Orcutt parkway plan hits speed bumps

By Chuck Schultz/Senior Staff Writer

An endangered salamander, a historic farmhouse and a tangle of government bureaucracy are creating more delays in plans to extend Union Valley Parkway to improve traffic flow in Orcutt.

After decades of discussion and several years of environmental review, exactly when construction will begin on that project remains uncertain. But it's probably still at least 12 to 18 months away, officials said.

One thing's clear: No work will start this summer, as had previously been hoped, on the first phase that would extend the parkway westward from Hummel Drive, possibly to Blosser Road. That \$12 million worth of road work can't begin until a plethora of city, county, state and federal officials and agencies sign off on environmental documents that are several months from being ready for public comment.

Any unexpected snags in completing that environmental review, and then getting required federal permits - for work that may affect habitat for the endangered tiger salamander - could be costly. About \$3 million in federal funding allocated for the parkway extension must be used no later than the 2008-2009 fiscal year, officials said.

"We're hoping to be able to" meet that deadline, said Santa Maria Public Works Director David Whitehead. "Our current plans are for construction to occur in 2008-09." He declined to predict a start date.

Other officials familiar with the project said it's unlikely any work will begin before 2009, however, because of the multiple levels of review the environmental documents and related permits must undergo by numerous government agencies and the public.

Santa Maria city is the lead agency for the environmental review, but Caltrans is also involved and the analysis is also being scrutinized by federal agencies.

Before draft documents can be completed, studies must be done to determine the historical significance of a farmhouse on property along the east side of Highway 135, just south of Foster Road, formerly owned by the Richards family. That 52-acre parcel was purchased last year by Wal-Mart for undisclosed purposes, and its northerly portion would be bisected by the proposed roadway extension.

Union Valley Parkway crosses Bradley Road, ending on the west at Hummel Drive, before reaching Highway 135. On its east end, the parkway stops just short of Highway 101.

A farmhouse on the former Richards family property dates back to the 1800s, according to Bruce Nybo, a former Santa Maria city engineering employee now working as a consultant on the project.

Because federal funds are being used, the project must comply with the National Historic Preservation Act, including an assessment of historic resources on the property that has yet to be completed, officials said. A state historic preservation officer also must concur with that study's findings before environmental documents can be circulated for public review.

"We hope to have the environmental document completed and available for public review by the end of the year," Nybo said. "We continue to be optimistic, but there's always one thing or another" delaying

the process.

After that, a so-called Section 7 permit will also have to be obtained from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, due to the presence of tiger salamander habitat close to where the parkway would be extended. Getting that agency's approval will be a big hurdle to cross. No Section 7 permit has been issued locally by Fish and Wildlife, Nybo said, since the salamander was federally designated as an endangered species for Santa Barbara County in 2000.

As required by the Federal Highway Administration, a combined environmental analysis is being done for both the westward extension of Union Valley Parkway and for a new freeway interchange where the parkway would be linked to Highway 101.

Enabling motorists to enter and exit the freeway at Union Valley Parkway, and use it as a major east-west thoroughfare, would help relieve traffic congestion on Clark Avenue, Santa Maria Way, Lakeview Road and other nearby roadways, officials predict.

Frustrated by the continual delays, County Supervisor Joni Gray wants the two projects evaluated separately so the interchange could be built as soon as possible. Because of the federal decree, though, "we can't unlink them" until the environmental documents have been completed and certified, said Steve VanDenburgh, deputy director of the Santa Barbara County Association of Governments. After that, he said, the interchange and the parkway extension projects could proceed on separate tracks.

Gray is dismayed that the predicted start of construction for the interchange, estimated to cost \$17 million but still largely unfunded, has been pushed back to 2010-2011, mostly due to the slow progress of the environmental review.

"I'm very frustrated because the complexion of the project changed so many times and because the original goal, of opening onramps and offramps there, got lost," she said. Orcutt has only "two very poorly designed on-and-off ramps" at Clark and Santa Maria Way, she added, for a community of about 34,000 people.

Building an interchange connecting to Union Valley Parkway "would take the (traffic) backup off of Clark, it would take the backup off of Santa Maria Way, without impacting any neighborhoods."

About \$7 million has been allocated to the interchange project so far, including future design work, but that still leaves \$10 million to \$11 million unfunded, VanDenburgh said. How that will eventually be funded depends on when the interchange is ready to be built, he said.

One possible source would be Measure D, but only if county voters extend that half-percent sales tax for roads and transportation projects, which is due to expire in 2010. Measure D is expected to be placed on the November 2008 ballot for renewal, but it would require two-thirds voter approval.

The Union Valley Parkway interchange "could be included in the renewal measure's expenditure plan" VanDenburgh said. "It's definitely a candidate" for that funding, he said, along with other projects such as widening the freeway bridges over the Santa Maria River and adding passing lanes on Highway 246 between Buellton and Lompoc.

Whitehead said the "preferred alternative" identified in the Union Valley Parkway environmental documents is to extend it directly west to Blosser Road.

“That's what the project is,” he stressed, although other alternatives are also being evaluated, such as stopping the parkway at Highway 135 or veering the route north near 135 to connect to Foster Road and avoid the Foxenwood neighborhood.

Since 1964, traffic circulation planning documents have envisioned Union Valley Parkway “going due west (from Hummel), which brings it within 60 to 80 feet of the Foxenwood neighborhood,” Nybo said. “The Foxenwood residents who have expressed concerns would like the parkway to (instead) cross 135 and then go north, following the Foster Road alignment, but want the road to go all the way to Blosser,” he added.

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