

Caltrans Paves Way for Four-Lane Road and Somis' Demise

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What is the future of Highway 118, especially the 118/34 intersection in Somis? Two distinct problems are being conflated, confusing almost everyone:

- *A short-term problem*—the traffic jam at the intersection of Highway 118 and Highway 34 / Somis Road.
- *A long-term problem*—how best to move people along the Highway 118 and Highway 34/Somis Road corridors in the future.

The short-term problem is about an "operational" improvement to an existing roadway. The long-term problem is about full-scale permanent modifications to transportation corridors—expanding them well beyond the existing roadways.

The short-term/long-term distinction is important because the two kinds of projects are funded from different pots of money and are subject to different approval requirements.

In particular, the full-scale permanent expansion of a highway corridor requires a full corridor Environmental Impact Report, including identification and analysis of alternatives before any of it is begun. "Operational" improvements are subject to substantially fewer requirements.

Whether or not to fix the 118/34 intersection to relieve traffic congestion is not at issue. Everyone, including the Somis community, recognizes the problem there.

Somis locals, then, are not opposing improvements to the intersection itself. They ARE opposing the particular design being promoted by Caltrans. Why? Because (a) it is way overbuilt and (b) it presupposes, absent any analysis of alternatives, that 34/Somis Road will be widened to four lanes through the town of Somis, as part of an eventual full-scale highway expansion that no one is willing to talk about. If you've been there, you know that four-laning the road through Somis will obliterate it.

The controversy then, is about how to fix the problem intersection WITHOUT starting the path to four-laning Highways 34 and 118. Caltrans' current grandiose plan for the intersection, despite carefully worded denials, is obviously designed for such four-laning. It even includes right-of-way set-asides to start it.

The good news is that there's a solution—one that relieves the traffic jam without casting Somis as the squish-ee in "Bambi Meets Godzilla."

The Somis folks don't want their community to be obliterated. They do want their government to follow, not avoid, the requirements for long-term projects. So they hired a traffic engineer who designed an alternative intersection improvement which, while still large, is not as huge and doesn't take nearly as much right-of-way as the Caltrans proposal. Most important, it mitigates the immediate traffic jam problem without casting in concrete (so to speak) the ultimate demise of Somis.

Why would Supervisor Mikels, Ventura County Transportation Commission (VCTC) and Caltrans ignore such a win-win solution? Because they and County Public Works currently have disguised but comprehensive plans for a vastly expanded "roads-only" transportation infrastructure—an interchange here (Rice Road), a road-widening there (Santa Clara Ave. to the 118), an intersection improvement somewhere else (Somis), and on and on.

If you "connect the dots" for all these "minor" road projects NOW planned by the county and Caltrans, you see what appears to be an orchestrated attempt to build a four-lane highway direct from Moorpark to the Port of Hueneme, but without following the requirements for such long-term projects.

The Somis intersection is but one in a series of fully-related projects that some decision makers would prefer no one notice are related.

This brings us to the second issue: the long term transportation problem.

There should be a highway and transportation corridor study done with full environmental review to address how best to enable people to get across the County. A corridor study should include not only road alternatives but also rail and transit alternatives—and should look ahead to what we want Ventura County to look like in 20-50 years—depending on which alternatives are selected.

How and where roads are built will ultimately determine what happens to Ventura County. If we let our government officials piecemeal together new four-lane highways without proper analysis and public disclosure, then the Las Posas Valley from Moorpark to Somis, Saticoy and the Oxnard Plain will start looking like the San Fernando Valley on steroids and the voter mandate of SOAR will have meant nothing. On top of that, 18-wheel truck traffic through Moorpark will increase, not decrease.

So what should happen? First, transportation decision makers should accept the community-designed solution for the 118/34 intersection and start construction in order to relieve the existing (short-term) traffic problem while avoiding the destruction of Somis. This would enable them and the community to engage in a separate (later) discussion, with analysis of alternatives and appropriate funding mechanisms, on the separate (long-term) questions of the Highway 118 and 34/Somis Road corridors.

If there were ever a time for vision and political leadership, this is it. We need thoughtful approaches to develop solutions that don't make matters worse. Let's work to elevate the public discussion on this most critical county-wide transportation dilemma.

If we don't begin now, we will cement over our future, for a lack of vision and responsiveness to a people who have clearly said enough is enough.

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