

Highway 4 widening plans moving forward despite budget impasse

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The widening of Highway 4 — the completion of which will draw an audible sigh of relief from tens of thousands of East County commuters — is moving forward even as the state announced earlier this month it would freeze \$30 million earmarked for part of the project.

Many East County residents who claw their way daily through miles of gridlock were upset by the Pooled Money Investment Board's decision to withhold \$4 billion in loans that would have funded thousands of infrastructure projects throughout California, including part of the Highway 4 widening.

But Susan Miller, project director for the Contra Costa Transportation Authority, said the freeze does not threaten to delay Highway 4 work because it represents only a portion of the \$140 million allocated to widen the route from Loveridge Road to Somersville Road. The other component of the widening work — from Somersville to State Route 160 — has a \$500 million-plus price tag, but isn't affected by the withheld funds.

The earliest CCTA would need to access the \$30 million is after PG&E relocates its utility lines, which include a 24-inch gas line and 14 electricity towers, Miller said. That work will last through the summer, at which point CCTA will start going out to bid for the first stages of roadwork.

"I'm hoping (the investment board) comes to a resolution by May or June," Miller said. "If not, then we will probably look back at local dollars and see if we can do some shifting."

The project, which will build on the widening work that now peters out at Loveridge Road in Pittsburg, still has a forecast completion date of 2015. In total, it will include:

- Widening the highway from two lanes to four lanes in both directions.

- Adding high-occupancy vehicle lanes between Loveridge and Hillcrest roads.
- Reconstructing the Loveridge, Somersville, L Street, A Street and Hillcrest interchanges.
- Creating a wide median for eBART.

Officials from the city of Antioch and BART are still deciding where to locate a future station near Hillcrest Avenue. Some Highway 4 planning hinges on that decision because the eBART infrastructure will be built simultaneously with the roadwork.

Antioch Councilman Brian Kalinowski, who was appointed this month to serve as Antioch's liaison to three regional transportation boards, said alleviating Highway 4's congestion remains as much of a priority for officials as it is for residents.

"Highway 4 is on everybody's radar screen, from Antioch to Washington, D.C., so I think there are commitments to make sure the Highway 4 widening project continues as it's currently programmed," Kalinowski said. "So I'm hopeful the state will work its issues out so we can move forward on this and other projects that are potentially impacted."

A recent set of public meetings focused on the construction of sound walls that will go up between residential areas and the new highway. Miller said the feedback from stakeholders was largely positive, as most people just want to see construction get started.

"It's really no big surprise, because it's been publicized for quite some while," Miller said. "They just want to know what's the process and when."