

Corona Council Keeps Option Open for a Future Freeway

■A building moratorium is imposed for a possible link between Riverside and Orange counties.

By Hanah Cho and Seema Mehta, Times Staff Writer

The Corona City Council voted unanimously Wednesday to impose a building moratorium on 500 acres that local transportation officials consider a prime location for a possible freeway that would link Riverside and Orange counties.

City leaders said the land near Interstate 15 and Cajalco Road is in a good location to build an alternative to the traffic-choked Riverside Freeway. A new freeway could also link up with a new 40-mile, east-west thoroughfare between Corona and Hemet that is in the planning stages.

"There is no single issue that plagues our region more than traffic," said Councilman Darrell Talbert.

After a 45-minute public hearing, the council voted 5 to 0 to enact a 45-day building moratorium, which will probably be extended to two years.

The freeway proposal, one of many transportation alternatives being studied to create a new corridor between the counties, would connect Interstate 15 to the Eastern toll road in Orange County, and would include a tunnel through the Santa Ana Mountains.

The proposal is the most prominently discussed among local politicians in Riverside County.

Mayor Jeff Bennett said a moratorium is necessary to prevent houses and commercial properties from being built on the land only to have government agencies possibly condemn them in a few years to make way for a freeway.

"That would be far worse than what we plan to do today," Bennett said before the vote.

The developer who was planning to build 885 homes as well as commercial and industrial facilities on the former grapefruit orchard opposed the city's action.

"We are not part of the problem; we are part of the solution," said Mike Kerr, president of Bluestone Communities in Newport Beach. The developer said his company began its planning process two years ago and spent "a considerable amount of money."

As part of the ordinance, the City Council directed its staff to work with the Bluestone to alleviate Kerr's concerns and any other issues.

After the vote, Kerr said he hoped that the city and his company could agree to allow Bluestone to continue with the entitlement process. "We want to be treated fairly," Kerr

said.

The moratorium will be in effect as transportation officials from Riverside and Orange counties study potential routes for a freeway or thoroughfare. The \$3-million, 18-month study will begin this year.

Local transportation officials have voiced support for the moratorium.

"We'll certainly work with the city closely as we move forward on studying new routes for this corridor," said John Standiford, spokesman for the Riverside County Transportation Commission.

Proponents of the alignment near Corona say it would serve two purposes.

Most important, it will provide an alternative to the busy Riverside Freeway.

In addition, two-lane Cajalco Road linking Corona and Hemet is being expanded to as many as six lanes and might one day become a freeway.

Unless there is another route into Orange County, many of those drivers will end up on the Interstate 15 and then the Riverside Freeway, adding to the congestion.

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