

With Eye on Possible Freeway, Corona May Freeze 500 Acres

■The City Council might act tonight with a future link between Riverside and Orange counties in mind. A company wants to build homes there.

By Seema Mehta, Times Staff Writer

With freeway gridlock expected to grow worse in the decades ahead, the Corona City Council tonight will consider a development moratorium on 500 acres that could eventually be used for a new freeway linking Riverside and Orange counties.

Such a freeway, one of several options being explored by area transportation officials, would be an alternative to the traffic-choked Riverside Freeway and link up with a new 40-mile east-west thoroughfare that will connect Corona and Hemet.

Bluestone Communities of Newport Beach, which plans to develop the land into 885 single-family homes as well as some retail and industrial centers, says it supports Corona's effort to alleviate the region's traffic problems. But company President Mike Kerr said he hopes city officials will treat the company, and its private-property rights, in a just manner.

Corona Mayor Jeff Bennett said a moratorium on new development would be a safe and wise decision.

"Let's say, for argument's sake, that this is the chosen corridor and they've already built all these homes. You'd have to eminent-domain, and the cost factor goes up tenfold," Bennett said.

If approved by the City Council, an emergency building moratorium would be effective for 45 days and could be expanded to two years. A four-fifths vote is required.

"The city is trying to be proactive," said Assistant City Manager Brad Robbins.

Bluestone Communities' prospective development parcel, near Interstate 15 and Cajalco Road, was an old grapefruit orchard. Kerr said he hopes the city will sign an agreement with the company to ensure that, at the very least, the property's value as a prime location for development is properly recorded.

A decision on building a new freeway between the two counties is years away, and several options are being studied. Later this year, the Orange County Transportation Authority and the Riverside County Transportation Commission will embark on a \$3-million, 18-month study to narrow down the options.

John Standiford, spokesman for the Riverside transportation agency, said the Corona land could be crucial as officials try to determine the best alternatives.

"It's readily accessible from the I-15. That's a major future growth area," he said. He said trying to keep it undeveloped makes sense.

"What they're accomplishing is an important strategy for future transportation planning," he said. "They're being thoughtful in trying to consider every alternative."

Bennett said a new freeway in the area is also important in dealing with congestion in the city.

That's because nearby Cajalco Road is being widened to as many as six lanes, connecting Corona and Hemet, and could one day become its own freeway, thus creating a demand for increased traffic to flow elsewhere.

The Transportation Commission picked a route for that extension this year and will discuss budgets and timetables at its meeting in September.

"When that gets put in place, we'll have a couple hundred thousand cars a day dumping on the 15 with no [other] place to go," he said.

"With the growth rate out here, in another four or five years, we'll have double. It doesn't move now."

