

## ***“Cross-forest highway routes considered”***

***ROADS: Orange and Riverside counties ponder a possible \$3 billion project.***

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By Chris Reed

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ANAHEIM HILLS - Orange County and Riverside County took the first formal step Monday toward building a hugely expensive highway through the Cleveland National Forest to relieve congestion on the Riverside (91) Freeway and prepare for future growth.

Gathering in a restaurant banquet room located a few feet from an on-ramp to the 91, a panel of board members and executives from the Orange County Transportation Authority and the Riverside County Transportation Commission agreed to jointly study possible forest routes as well as ways to improve the existing freeway.

About 230,000 cars a day use the 91. The volume is projected to double by 2020, reducing rush-hour speeds to 7 mph.

"We just know there's got to be a (new) connection between our counties," said Palm Springs Mayor Will Kleindienst, vice chairman of Riverside's transportation agency.

The agency's engineers have already begun reviewing three possible routes for a four- to six-lane, 15- to 20-mile highway: from Cajalco Road in Corona to the Foothill (241) Toll Road; from Lake Elsinore to San Juan Capistrano, near the existing, two-lane Ortega Highway; and from Temecula to San Clemente.

Orange County Supervisor Todd Spitzer's "ballpark" estimate of the cost: \$3 billion.

But not everyone agreed that a consensus had been reached - among either the public or its elected officials.

Riverside County Supervisor Bob Buster said both counties needed to do much more to upgrade the capacity of the 91 before getting serious about a cross-forest highway.

After the meeting, Buster said he was skeptical the forest route would ever be built, given the cost and environmentalists' objections. Buster also said he feared the highway would lock Riverside County into a "subservient position" by cementing its status as a bedroom community whose residents drive elsewhere for their jobs.

But Spitzer downplayed Buster's concerns, suggesting they were part of a strategy to try to jump-start stalled efforts in Sacramento to have the state buy the four toll lanes on a 10 mile section of the 91 and open them to regular traffic.

"We can't make any decision unless and until there is a resolution of what we're going to do with the 9 I," Spitzer said.