



Saturday
April 5, 2008

The San Diego

Union-Tribune.

50¢
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Final

Highway 94 Club members put road safety first

Others equate upgrades, growth

By Ben Noble
April 5, 2008

JAMUL – Don Sauter once witnessed a head-on collision on the rural two-lane stretch of state Route 94 near his home in Jamul. Now he's serving his third term as president of the Highway 94 Club, which is devoted to safety on that road.

"It's not just a little thing to us," Sauter said. "I've held funerals for people who have been killed on 94 as a minister."

The Highway 94 Club has about 100 members. Their goal is to raise money and awareness of safety issues on Highway 94. About half of the members of the group meet at the Barrett Junction Cafe on the third Thursday of each month.

"We joke, we laugh, we set up raffles every month to raise money; it's a fun group," said Sauter. "And the chicken is good."

But after a prayer and the Pledge of Allegiance, they get down to the business of improving safety along a notorious 18-mile span of the highway that stretches east of Jamul. The group's goal, though, isn't universally accepted; – some are concerned that straightening and widening the road would attract growth to the rural region.

The Highway 94 Club, established in 1953, works with the California Department of Transportation, writes grants, and posts signs tallying deaths and accidents along the highway. Members lobbied Rep. Bob Filner, (D-San Diego) to include funds earmarked for use along this stretch of highway in the most recent federal transportation bill. Caltrans received \$2.65 million for the project.

The group wants turning lanes, grading changes and other improvements, especially to six curves they consider the most dangerous on that highway.

In 2001, Caltrans completed preliminary studies required for an improvement project, but a downturn in the state economy put the project on hold. The transportation agency is considering several ways to improve the safety of Highway 94 between Melody Road and the state Route 188 exit.

Former club president Gordon Hammers says his group's analysis suggests "that there are really only six curves that deserve the kind of (immediate) attention that is required. No one is asking for a four-lane superhighway."

Sam Amen, a Caltrans project manager, said his agency tried adding passing lanes years ago, but sections of the community felt that Caltrans should further analyze the potential environmental impacts. Hammers said excessive environmental studies shouldn't be necessary when immediate safety is at risk.

"Get some attorneys with some (nerve) and make it happen," Hammers said.

Some in the community, though, welcome the environmental studies. Carl Meyer, the chairman of the Potrero planning group, said the reason most people live in rural East County is because of the natural resources, which should be preserved.

Meyer said widening the road would allow for more development. The highway "could have fewer curves, but it is fine the way it is," he said.

Sauter insisted the group cares about the environment.

"We are interested, we live here, and that's why we moved here . . . for the environment," he said. "But there's also a safety issue."

Amen said analyzing the corridor as a whole is necessary to get federal funds in addition to expected state funds. Amen pointed out that Caltrans has been working on many smaller projects to improve the safety of the corridor without jeopardizing the integrity of the environmental impact study.

"If we do this right, then nobody can question the numbers." Amen said.

The bulk of the environmental studies are expected to be completed by the end of the year.

One of the first things Amen did after taking over as Caltrans project manager in 2005 was to attend a Highway 94 Club monthly meeting. He considers the meetings helpful and effective.

"They don't dance around the issue. They tell you exactly what they want to your face, and they expect a straight answer," Amen said.

"As long as they've been in business and as well as they should know the law, (Caltrans) should be able to put together a program that's bulletproof," Hammers said. "It's not like it's the first highway they've built."

■ Ben Noble is a freelance writer in San Diego.