

Section of state Route 76 widened, straightened

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FALLBROOK — The redesign and widening of a 1.3-mile section of state Route 76 — a North County highway that has become far more traveled in recent years — have been completed.

The highway has been widened and straightened from Interstate 15 east to a new quarry at a cost of \$26 million. It's being paid for by Granite Construction, which owns Rosemary's Mountain Quarry, and the Pala Band of Mission Indians, who operate a casino nearby.

It's the first phase of what officials hope will be further improvements to the highway east of I-15 during the next decade.

The project entailed widening the roadway from two to four lanes and eliminating two sharp bends that required vehicles to slow to 30 mph.

Granite Construction was required to do the widening as a condition to open the quarry, which had been in the planning process for nearly two decades.

Granite and Pala eventually will be reimbursed through San Diego County's Transportation Impact Fee Fund. The fund is bankrolled through fees paid by developers in San Diego County.

Pala has also committed to spending \$20 million for shoulder widening, passing lanes and other improvements to four miles of Route 76 from the quarry to the reservation. It has spent \$5 million for improvements to the highway in front of the resort — part of an agreement the tribe made with the county so it could expand its casino.

Edward Cartagena, a California Department of Transportation spokesman, said it's unknown when the improvements will be made between the quarry and the reservation. Caltrans and the tribe are hashing out details now and should have something worked out by next spring, he said.

The county hopes to negotiate a similar agreement with the Pauma Band of Mission Indians when that tribe's plans to build a \$300 million resort are further along. The downturn in the economy has halted those plans for now. Pauma has a small but popular casino now on its land about 10 miles east of I-15, near Cole Grade Road.

State Route 76 used to be a sleepy stretch of road, but not anymore. During one 10-minute period yesterday afternoon, 162 vehicles passed in both directions about 1½ miles west of the Pala casino.

The casinos, which include Harrah's Rincon resort and casino farther east, have caused an immense increase in traffic. The quarry will generate 200 to 300 truck trips a day when in full operation, and the long-proposed Gregory Canyon landfill, which would be about two miles east of the quarry, would generate about 500 truck trips a day should it ever win final approval.

A new power plant near Pala and some residential developments also will increase use of the highway in coming years.

Although traffic fatalities along the highway are no greater than those for other similar routes, according to statistics, many have occurred over the years.

One of the worst happened in December 2007, when four people were killed after a driver suspected of being under the influence of drugs and alcohol hit a guardrail, then careened into the opposing lane around a blind curve about two miles east of Pala.

That driver, Deanne Fridley of Pala, goes on trial next month in Vista Superior Court.

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<http://www3.signonsandiego.com/stories/2009/sep/18/section-state-route-76-widened-straightened/?northcounty&zIndex=167848>