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Hwy. 17 safety push pays off

San Jose Mercury News 11/18/04

COLLABORATIVE CAMPAIGN TO REDUCE CRASHES WORKING FAR BETTER THAN OFFICIALS HOPED

By Gary Richards
Mercury News

Six years after Caltrans, the California Highway Patrol, county transportation officials and business leaders began a \$62 million-plus effort to reduce crashes on Highway 17, the verdict is conclusive:

It's working. Far beyond what they hoped.

At the current pace, collisions this year will have fallen 46 percent from 1998 on the 18-mile, four-lane road from Santa Cruz to Los Gatos. When the campaign began in 1999, officials were hoping for just a 10 percent reduction.

"This year is turning out to be a very good year," said Jason Butler, a CHP spokesman. "Collisions are much lower than even last year."

State officials launched the safety effort

after a 21 percent rise in accidents and a 29 percent increase in injuries from 1997 to 1998 on the Santa Cruz County side of the road.

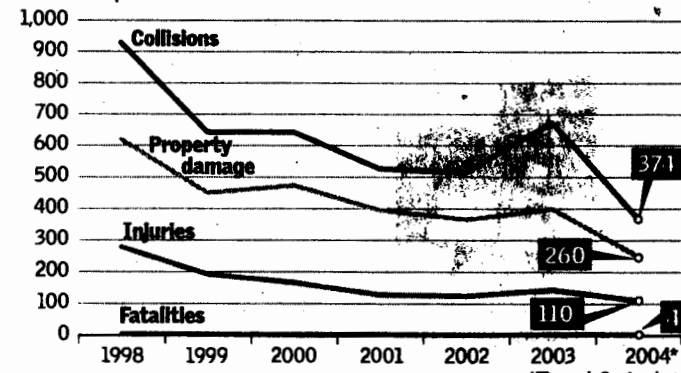
Where 929 crashes occurred in 1998, 374 have been recorded through the first nine months of this year. In June, there were just eight crashes between the summit and Scotts Valley, the fewest on that section in six years.

The program, which safety advocates tout as a model to improve safety on California's most dangerous roads, combines education, engineering and enforcement.

Electronic signs have been placed to alert drivers to their speed. And state engineers have made numerous improve-

Accidents on Highway 17

At the current rate, by year's end, collisions on Highway 17 will have dropped 46 percent since 1998, when a police crackdown and numerous safety improvements were begun in an attempt to lower a rising number of injuries and deaths on the four-lane highway between Santa Cruz and Los Gatos.



Source: California Highway Patrol

*Through September
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HWY. 17 | Safety campaign surpasses expectations

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ments, and more are planned. But drivers say the biggest factor keeping them at the 50 mph limit is the increased presence of the Highway Patrol.

"The CHP has done a good job of curbing the habits of aggressive drivers," said John Credi, who has commuted over the hill to Sunnyvale for three years.

Added Paul Bacon of Santa Cruz: "Kudos to the CHP for making it safer for us daily commuters."

The proof is in the ticket book. The CHP has issued more than 12,000 tickets through the first 10 months of 2004.

Instead of three officers keeping tabs on drivers, as many as 12 may be on the road during the busiest times of the day. Motorcycle cops joined the effort two years ago after Internet messages went out alerting motorists where patrol cars parked. Scotts Valley and Santa Cruz police began patrols as well.

Even when drivers can't see cops lurking, "they know we are out there," Butler said.

The program, dubbed Safe on 17, brought together road officials from agencies who normally might not get together. Four years ago, Caltrans engineers from San Luis Obispo and Oakland joined CHP officers from Aptos and San Jose, political and transportation officials from Santa Cruz and Santa Clara counties and truckers on a bus tour to view firsthand the danger spots.

The result: action.

A new electronic sign went up near the Glenwood Curve, flashing the speed of approaching traffic on one of the southbound's most accident-prone locations. Left turns out of the Cats restaurant were banned. The old "Wreck Ahead" sign that traffic cops had to activate by hand at the summit has been replaced by a large electronic sign. Truckers even volunteered to avoid the road at commute times.

Caltrans spent more than \$20 million laying new pave-

ment, which has drawn praise for easing spinouts during wet weather, adding more warning signs and installing guardrails. Next month, road crews will begin removing about 100 redwood trees that block the vision of drivers around the nastiest northbound curves — once dubbed the Valley Surprise — after Summit Road.

"You will be able to see better around those curves," said Caltrans' John Thomas, adding that for every tree the state chops down, it will plant three elsewhere in the area. "This should be a big help."

That will soon be followed by the installation of new guardrails and a median barrier on the Santa Clara County side, a project that could cost \$30 million more and take two years to complete. A \$12 million project to do similar work near Glenwood is perhaps two years away.

The safety program has been copied in San Benito County, where agencies have worked on making Highway 25 safer, and in Contra Costa County along Vasco Road.

The Safe on 17 approach almost came to a halt two years ago when grant money for overtime patrols ran out. Regional leaders agreed to assess a \$1 fee on all vehicles registered in Santa Cruz County and the nine Bay Area counties, money that is now used to pay for 2,000 hours of CHP overtime a year.

When Linda Wilshusen, who is retiring next month after 19 years with the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission, wrote her farewell letter, she said: "One of the things I felt most proud of was being associated with this group working on 17. It's really made a difference."

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