

Finally, last Dumbarton Bridge access road ready

□ But the traffic jams may continue

By Steve Taylor
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As the years passed as slowly as their cars moved through traffic snarls, thousands of East Bay commuters waited impatiently for the new Dumbarton Bridge project to be completed.

Riders in the 24,000 cars that cross the span each weekday have seen bulldozers move earth, crews lay pavement and rain delay the progress on new roads being con-

structed to and from the bridge.

They have waited as construction contributed to unexpected, unusually long traffic jams that sometimes stretched for more than two miles, from west Menlo Park, over the bridge and into Fremont and Newark.

This week, the wait ends. University Avenue in East Palo Alto, the last new access route, is to be opened to bridge traffic.

The question now is: Will the bridge and new roads be enough to

handle the increasing number of cars and trucks that traverse them?

If not, traffic snarls will continue, and the stage may be set for the next battle over the Dumbarton Bridge, which probably would resemble the old battles over the bridge.

New pavement will be opened sometime this week so that cars heading to and from the bridge can

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□ And East Palo Alto's problem just starting

While East Bay commuters will be happy when the new access road connects the Dumbarton Bridge to University Avenue this week, there will be little joy in East Palo Alto.

During the mid-1970s, when the question of using University Avenue as an approach to the bridge arose, the East Palo Alto Municipal Council approved the plan, primarily because it hoped the connection would lure industry into the area and commuters would

make purchases from local businesses.

The San Mateo County Board of Supervisors, which governed the then-unincorporated community, heeded the Municipal Council's wishes and approved of the connection.

If city leaders today had their choice, there would be no connection. Mayor Barbara Mouton has led a chorus of criticism in recent weeks that probably will grow louder along with the roar of auto-

mobile and truck engines on the community's main street.

The California Department of Transportation estimates half of the 24,000 vehicles that cross the bridge each weekday will take University Avenue to get to and from jobs, schools and other destinations. The other half will take two different routes, on Willow Road through Menlo Park and on the new Bayfront Expressway, which

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use University Avenue. It will be the third and last approach from the west side of the Bay to the Dumbarton Bridge.

Already, commuters can drive to and from the bridge via Willow Road in Menlo Park and the new Bayfront Expressway that connects to the Bayshore Freeway interchange at Marsh Road. A new section of Willow Road will be completed between Bayshore and the bridge sometime next spring, but the existing road will remain open until then.

In the middle of the San Francisco Bay, the new concrete bridge is completed. It replaced the 57-year-old steel structure, part of which is to be blown up this week.

On the east end, a single, free-way-type access road is to be opened in November. The four-lane stretch (two lanes of traffic in each direction) will replace a nearly two-lane road.

When it's completed, however, there is a good chance it won't be good enough, according to Paul Hensley, the Dumbarton Bridge project manager for the California Department of Transportation. Caltrans intends to conduct a yearlong study to learn if the \$200 million project eliminates long traffic jams and permits East Bay commuters to get to and from Peninsula jobs in reasonable amounts of time.

Preliminary studies already indicate some traffic jams will continue. In a May 1981 report, Caltrans concluded that congestion will occur on the Peninsula side of the bridge on Willow Road and University Avenue, both during the morning and evening commute times.

As many as 2,400 vehicles per hour will cross the bridge during commute times, but Willow Road will be jammed after the figure reaches 1,700 and University Avenue will be congested after the figure reaches 1,900, the study concludes.

"This congestion will get worse in the future as demand increases," according to the Caltrans report.

That should come as no surprise when remembering the long history of the bridge project. At one time transportation planners intended to connect a widened Dumbarton Bridge to a proposed Willow Expressway that was to whisk commuters across the Peninsula rough-

ly along Willow Road out to Sand Hill Road and eventually Interstate 280.

There also was a plan for an access road connecting the new bridge with Embarcadero Road in Palo Alto.

Both the expressway and Embarcadero Road connection met with vehement opposition from Menlo Park and Palo Alto residents who thought their neighborhoods would pay the price of easing the commute for East Bay residents driving to jobs on the Peninsula.

Residents claimed the new bridge and access routes would stimulate overdevelopment on the Peninsula and would dump more traffic on their streets. After losing the battle to stop the bridge itself, they set about to restrict the access routes through their communities.

According to an independent study financed by East Bay cities, the traffic problem today already is worse. TJKM Transportation Consultants of Walnut Creek analyzed the Caltrans report and concluded the figure of 2,400 vehicles per hour using the bridge at rush hour is "a very low estimate."

"The estimate was made somewhere around 1975 and does not take into account recent decisions in the tri-city area (Fremont, Newark and Union City) which will result in increased demand on the bridge," the consultants concluded.

"Recent decisions" refers to a housing boom, sponsored by the three cities, that is occurring. Condominiums and single-family houses are being constructed in large numbers, and sales are brisk — in part because buyers believe the Dumbarton Bridge commute will be easier once the new access roads are opened.

East of the bridge, the new four-lane freeway can carry up to 3,600 vehicles per hour, TJKM concluded. That means if the traffic load increases to figures between 2,400 and 3,600 vehicles per hour, there will be no traffic jams in Fremont or on the bridge, but there will be regular congestion on the Peninsula side.

Hensley said Caltrans believes 50 percent of all bridge traffic will use University Avenue because surveys show half the commuters are destined for Palo Alto or points south. The other half will be about evenly split between Willow Road and Marsh Road, according to Caltrans figures.

For that reason, TJKM concluded, "The west-Bay Area will suffer from immediate congestion, with the current demand exceeding the

planned capacity of (the University and Willow) roadways."

Hensley thinks "traffic should flow pretty smoothly" and he does not expect any continual problems. He expects that many commuters will detour south to Highway 237 between Milpitas and Sunnyvale once car-pool lanes there are completed in November.

He acknowledged, however, that hundreds of today's Highway 237 travelers and others who now cross the San Mateo Bridge may detour to the Dumbarton Bridge. If problems result, solutions can include redesigning intersections or synchronizing traffic lights, he said.

A third solution could be adding a fourth access road. One possibility is the old idea of taking traffic around East Palo Alto to Embarcadero Road in Palo Alto, Hensley said.

A fourth answer might be widening west-side access roads. Plans now call for two lanes of westbound traffic to exit the bridge, but the pavement will narrow to one westbound lane after the University Avenue intersection.

Neither of the last two options appeal to most Peninsula civic leaders. Palo Alto long ago rejected an Embarcadero Road connection to the bridge and has permitted development on the street's east end so that constructing an access road would be difficult, if not impossible.

Widening access roads not only is unacceptable, it may be illegal, according to Atherton Councilman Malcolm Dudley, a longtime leader in the fight to keep the west-side access roads as narrow as possible.

Dudley once was president of a Peninsula group called the Citizens Against Dumbarton Bridge. It opposed construction of the new bridge and access roads as a method of discouraging East Bay commuters, who contribute to Peninsula traffic and parking problems.

To avoid a court fight, Caltrans and bridge opponents signed an agreement in August 1977 the specifically forbade any construction other than that now under way.

On the East Bay, there is a similar willingness to dismiss the issue for now. Fremont Mayor Leon Mazzetti thinks his city and others already are pursuing the best solution: luring industry to the East Bay — and sometimes from the Peninsula — so that local residents will not have to commute over the bridge to jobs.

"As we get industry, it (commute traffic) will go both ways," he said.

Saga of the Dumbarton Bridge

January 1965: On the Dumbarton Bridge's 38th birthday, state Sen. Richard Dolwig, R-Atherton, asks the Legislature to study the idea of reconstructing the span after fears are voiced that it soon will fall apart, due mainly to the fact that vehicles now are bigger and heavier than those which first crossed the span in 1927. Early cost estimates are around \$26 million.

October 1965: E.R. Foley, chief engineer for the state Division of Bay Toll Crossings, declares building a new bridge will be a better idea. Dolwig said that idea, too, is worthy of study.

January 1967: Plans for a new Dumbarton Bridge are submitted to the state Legislature by the state Division of Bay Toll Crossings. In August, Gov. Ronald Reagan signs a bill authorizing a study of the plans. Estimated cost now is \$40 million.

July 1972: Despite opposition from Peninsula citizens' groups, Gov. Reagan signs legislation to build a new bridge with four approach roads on the west side, to Marsh Road in Atherton, Willow Road in Menlo Park, University Avenue in East Palo Alto and Embarcadero Road in Palo Alto. Estimated cost now is \$60 million.

January 1974: Assemblyman John Vasconcellos, D-San Jose, introduces legislation that would require a public vote of approval in the South Bay area before a new Dumbarton Bridge can be constructed. It never is adopted by the state Legislature, despite the endorsement of new Gov. Jerry Brown.

March 1975: Gov. Brown's administration agrees to delay bridge construction while the state Legislature debates a bill by state Sen. Arlen Gregorio, D-San Mateo, that would halt project funding. At the same time, lawsuits filed by Palo Alto, Atherton and a citizens'

group called Citizens Against the Dumbarton Bridge to halt the work are pending in different courts.

August 1975: Gov. Brown reverses himself and says it is too late to stop the project, in part because Gregorio's legislation appears dead. The estimated cost is \$93.7 million.

September 1976: Gov. Brown signs legislation to speed up construction of a new bridge and eliminate any veto power by Peninsula cities. Estimated cost now is about \$100 million.

January 1977: Palo Alto's lawsuit to halt bridge construction is tossed out by San Mateo County Superior Court Judge Thomas Jenkins.

August 1977: In exchange for Atherton and the Citizens Against the Dumbarton Bridge dropping their lawsuit in U.S. District Court, the state agrees to build only three Peninsula access roads that permit only one lane of traffic in each direction.

February 1978: Ground is broken on the east side for the new bridge project. The estimated price now is \$125 million.

October 1982: The new Dumbarton Bridge is opened to traffic while access roads still are under construction. Estimated cost for entire project now is \$200 million.

August 1984: The new Marsh Road access road is opened.

September 1984: The new University Avenue access road is to be opened, perhaps as early as Monday. Old Dumbarton Bridge, now 57 years old, to be demolished.

November 1984: The single-access, four-lane road east of the bridge is to be opened.

March 1985: New toll plaza at end of east access road to be completed.

Spring 1985: New Willow Road access road to be opened.

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connects to Marsh Road.

Virtually all of the cars that will travel down University Avenue in the mornings will be destined for Palo Alto and points south, not East Palo Alto, according to Caltrans' survey of Dumbarton Bridge commuters. Thus, East Palo Alto will receive few or no benefits while it must deal with more problems than any other city affected by the bridge project.

East Palo Alto officials fear the heavy traffic will divide the community in two during morning and

evening commute times. City residents who try to travel across University Avenue at these hours will find their journeys difficult, they believe.

The traffic also will spread auto exhaust fumes all over the city, especially at rush hours, city leaders fear.

Another concern is the danger posed to pedestrians, especially children going to and from school who must cross or walk along University Avenue. Of particular concern are students who attend Costano Elementary School, which is bordered by University Avenue.

The City Council has thought about taking legal steps to curtail traffic, slow it down or eliminate

the problems it causes. But with the financially strapped city already dealing with several lawsuits, the council members have concluded that taking Caltrans to court would be a last, desperate resort.

Instead, city officials will monitor the situation closely and gather evidence to see if their fears become reality. If they do, they intend to press Caltrans to take steps to correct the problems.

Last week, a city-hired consulting firm began monitoring noise and air pollution at eight locations along University Avenue. Data gathered before the access road is opened will be compared to data gathered afterward.

— Steve Taylor