

Upfront

Local news, information and analysis

THE DUMBARTON CONNECTION

CONTROVERSIAL TRAFFIC-CALMING PROPOSAL WILL FINALLY BE STUDIED

BY DON KAZAK

Ever since the “new” Dumbarton Bridge debuted 20 years ago, people have talked about the need for a southern connection to relieve East Palo Alto of suffocating under bridge traffic twice a day.

And every time the topic has been raised, Palo Alto officials have more or less said it would be a terrible idea since the bridge connection would have to go through the baylands.

Now, it looks like the southern connection will at least get studied. Whether it will ever be built is another question.

The Valley Transportation Authority voted last week to contribute funding to an environmental and traffic study of a southern connection, adding to efforts to solve regional traffic headaches. The Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) has federal funds to study six potential bay crossings

— including the southern connection and rebuilding the Dumbarton railroad bridge.

“Everybody knows there’s a pretty intense problem” caused by the Dumbarton commuter traffic, said East Palo Alto Mayor Duane Bay. Both Santa Clara and San Mateo counties are looking at ways to alleviate the gridlock problems that often occur on the Bayshore Freeway

between Routes 84 (Woodside Road) and 85 (in Mountain View).

“It’s pretty hard to deny there’s a pretty big problem,” Bay said. “And it’s pretty hard to be against developing alternatives to be evaluated.”

But the southern connection has always loomed as a potential environmental nightmare for Palo Alto officials, because of ways it would impact the baylands. There is also fear that a southern connection, which would connect to the Bayshore Freeway from the bridge around Oregon Expressway or south of it, could also add traffic to Palo Alto streets.

Today, that traffic turns University Avenue in East Palo Alto into bumper-to-bumper traffic creeping along twice a day, and also severely congests Willow Road in Menlo Park.

“For too long, East Palo Alto has carried a burden of a regional traffic impact,”

said East Palo Alto City Councilwoman Sharifa Wilson. She noted the city had to contribute \$4 million to rebuild the University Avenue overpass to make its University Circle project work — a new overpass was needed as much for the bridge traffic as the project.

“The primary benefit (of a southern connection) would be in getting cars off East Palo Alto streets,” said Palo Alto Vice Mayor Dena Mossar. “It’s something Palo Altans will hate. It will go through our protected baylands and interfere with playing fields. It’s hard for me to see that the region as a whole will benefit, but East Palo Alto will benefit.”

Mossar is skeptical in part because of growth projections between now and the year 2025 that will add a million or more people to the Bay

Area and perhaps overwhelm any attempts to improve road capacity. Things will always get worse, by that perspective, especially for road projects that will cost hundreds of millions of dollars.

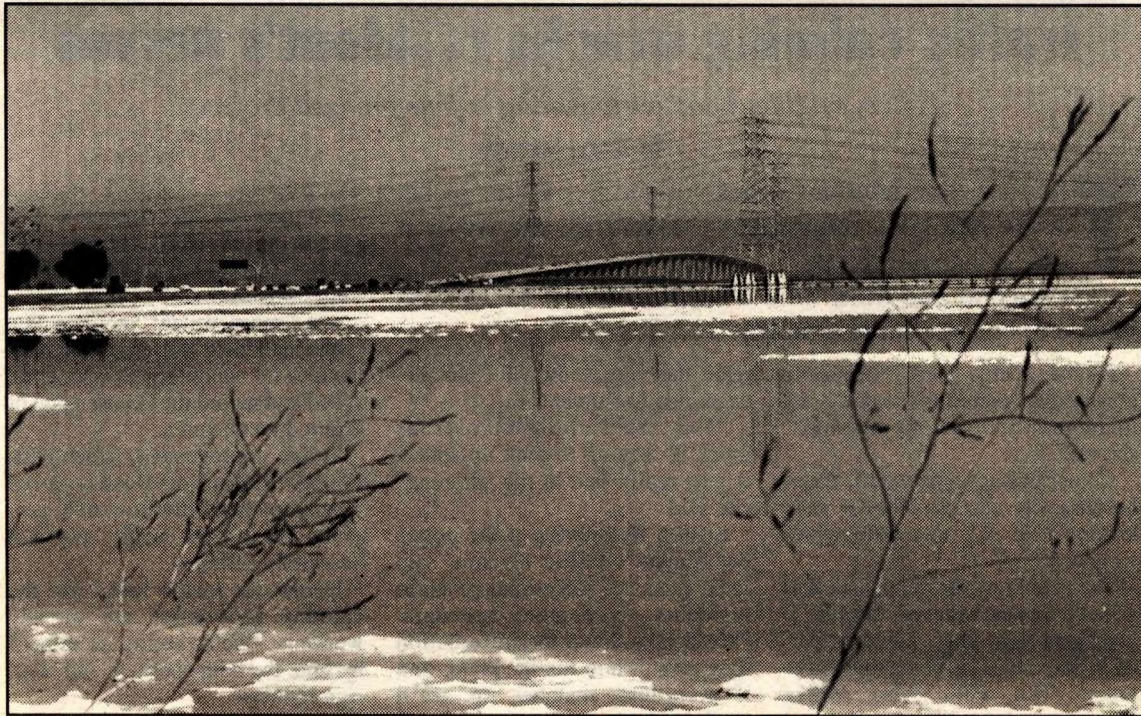
“I’d rather spend hundreds of millions of dollars to reduce the use of cars,” Mossar said.

The Dumbarton railroad bridge falls into that category. It’s the cheapest to build of the six bay-crossing improvements to be studied by MTC. Its only opponents are people who live near the old spur line leading to the bridge, and those residents had strong feelings when the idea of rebuilding the rail bridge surfaced a few years ago.

Menlo Park Mayor Steve Schmidt is taking a wait-and-see approach to the study of a southern connection.

“I have no position on it, but I would like to see the study, see what

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Kate Robertson/file

Looking east, the Dumbarton bridge stretches from the shores of East Palo Alto to Fremont.

Dumbarton

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environmental damage it would cause," Schmidt said. "East Palo Alto, and to some extent Menlo Park, would love to get the commuter traffic off University Avenue and Willow Road."

To that extent, the two cities are bearing the brunt of a regional traffic problem they didn't create but must deal with.

"It's extremely unfair to allow this regional traffic that impacts East Palo Alto so negatively and spills

over into Menlo Park," he said.

The MTC study includes several much larger projects farther north, include building a new trans-bay bridge, adding a trans-bay tube for BART, and widening the San Mateo Bridge.

Those projects would each range between \$2 billion and \$11 billion to build.

By comparison, rebuilding the Dumbarton rail bridge (\$286 million) and building a southern connection (\$640 million) are relatively cheap.

But, as Mossar has pointed out, no one has identified where any of that

money would come from.

Santa Clara County's Measure B traffic money has largely been earmarked for bringing BART to San Jose along the East Bay. "There is no extra money from Measure B," Mossar said.

It's also unclear what will happen when the feasibility studies are completed, or who will make the decision to proceed on projects like the Dumbarton rail bridge or the southern connection, because they reach so many jurisdictions. ■

E-mail Don Kazak at dkazak@paweekly.com