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## Half-way parkway approved for Riverside's mid-county

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By **DUG BEGLEY**  
The Press-Enterprise

The proposed Mid-County Parkway, once intended to stretch 32 miles between San Jacinto and Corona, will make it only half way.

But the decision to scale back the parkway to run from San Jacinto to Interstate 215 in Perris comes with many caveats, Riverside County Transportation Commission members stressed after approving plans for the 16-mile route Wednesday.

The parkway faced stiff opposition from residents west of I-215 and a \$3 billion price tag. So transportation commission staff presented a plan last month to scrap studying the parkway west of Perris. Planning would continue for the eastern portion of the route -- estimated to cost \$1.6 billion -- from Highway 79 in San Jacinto to I-215 in Perris. The planned road loosely follows the Ramona Expressway.



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Officials said the western portion is not needed for now because Riverside County is planning to improve nearby Cajalco Road from Perris to Corona.

Cajalco will be widened to six lanes in many areas and straightened so curves in the road are less treacherous.

County Transportation Director Juan Perez assured officials that Cajalco can carry anticipated increases in traffic for up to 25 years, even if new homes in the San Jacinto Valley and around Perris are built, as planners expect.

### PLANNING AHEAD

Business officials and one transportation commissioner chastised the board for squandering a chance to build a road before it's needed.

"I don't want to throw this out," Beaumont Councilman Roger Berg said, starting a nearly 10-minute monologue on the merits of building the entire parkway. "We need this east-west corridor completed."

He took exception to concerns raised by the Sierra Club and other environmental groups who said the parkway would threaten the Stephens' kangaroo rat, an endangered species native to the area.

"We have spent a lot of money on these rats," Berg said. "What about all the people? The residents who are stuck in traffic every day?"

He also questioned whether it was a good use of taxpayer money to spend \$34 million preparing for the entire route and then to abandon half of it.

Not building the parkway also hurts business, said Cecil Green, a former Riverside Chamber of Commerce board member who said the city's businesses suffered when officials opted not to widen Highway 91 more than 20 years ago.

The same will happen if the parkway is not built, Green warned.

"I am working for a business that would move into our area if the Mid-County Parkway was built," Green said. "If the Mid-County Parkway is not built, they are considering moving out of the state entirely."

### **Middle of the Road**

But promising to build the entire parkway would be foolhardy, other commissioners said.

With state and county sales tax revenues sliding to levels not seen since 2000, officials can promise to build roads, but realistically can't pay for them, County Supervisor Marion Ashley said.

Bob Buster, also a county supervisor, is a critic of the plan to build the parkway south of Lake Mathews between Corona and Perris. Officials should concentrate on what they can build to relieve traffic congestion, not shoot for projects that would take decades to build, he said.

"Even dreams must be modified to accept reality," Buster said.

Opposition to the western portion of the project, notably by environmental groups and residents of the Gavilan Hills area west of Perris, likely would have led to legal action against the transportation commission, many said.

County Supervisor Jeff Stone said building west of I-215 would be "a litigious minefield."

## **Promises Made**

Transportation commissioners repeatedly sought assurances from commission staff that other planned freeway repairs would not lose priority status. Commissioners also emphasized the belief the parkway eventually will reach to Corona, even if it's not part of the current project or follows the proposed route.

"It does not mean it is dead," said Canyon Lake Councilwoman Mary Craton.

Corona Councilwoman Karen Spiegel, also a commissioner, pressed for assurances the staff is not abandoning building a road between I-215 and Interstate 15 at some point in the future.

Commission staff said that section likely would be in place in the next 30 years. But other regional road projects are also moving forward. Improvements are planned along I-215, I-15 and the 91, especially at the 91/15 interchange in Corona.

Riverside city officials balked at building only half the parkway last month, saying they feared traffic from San Jacinto and Hemet would clog when it reaches I-215, and strain Riverside streets as drivers try to travel west.

Riverside Councilman Steve Adams said the city had assurances Cajalco and other east-west roads like Ethanac Road north of Sun City would be a priority. Ethanac is among a number of roads once considered for the Mid-County Parkway. By connecting streets such as Ethanac, so they lead to Highway 74 or flow from I-215 to western cities, Adams said some traffic might be diverted from streets in Perris and Riverside.

## **Not Full Support**

Critics of building the Mid-County Parkway west of I-215 applauded the decision to scale back but warned that widening Cajalco and building the eastern portion of the road posed problems.

Drew Feldman, conservation chairman of the San Bernardino Valley Audubon Society, representing most of Riverside and San Bernardino counties, said sensitive areas for wildlife and plants are threatened by both projects. The roads also raise noise and air pollution concerns, he said.

If officials want to look at the larger picture they need to recognize building roads is not the answer, said Laurie Taylor a vocal critic of the parkway's planned path west of I-215.

"How many people can this county support?" Taylor asked.

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