

# US 101 Pismo Congestion Relief: Left Shoulder Part-time Travel Lane Component



Photo Source: Federal Highway Administration



## LOCATION:

Southbound US 101 near Spyglass Drive to Pismo overhead (bridge over the railroad tracks) within the city of Pismo Beach, San Luis Obispo County.

## MAJOR FEATURE

Reconstruct the inside left shoulder for a part-time commuter lane during peak periods for about four miles. *This component will operate as a pilot project not to exceed five years without required legislative action.*

## BENEFITS

- Using a paved shoulder as a part-time travel lane alleviates recurring bottlenecks.
- Significantly reduces congestion-related collisions as freeway flow is restored.
- Improves and optimizes mobility and traffic flow on existing infrastructure.
- Minimizes congestion caused by stop-and-go conditions.
- Implementation costs less than adding a full-time third lane (estimated in the tens of millions) and avoids highway expansion beyond the existing state right-of-way.
- Timed operations of the new lane are adjustable based on traffic flows.
- Safety/performance benefits of the median shoulder area retained for non-operating hours (about 21 hours daily).
- Right shoulder maintains ability to provide safe refuge for vehicles involved in minor incidents, enforcement actions, breakdowns and tow removals.

## HOW IT WORKS

- Right shoulder remains unchanged while inside left shoulder is modified for a part-time travel lane/shoulder.
- Message signs inform motorists on hours of use, closures and merge locations.
- Part-time travel lane/shoulder opens and closes during monitored specific periods.
- Operating about three hours daily during peak travel times is recommended for this project.



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## CONSIDERATIONS

- Part-time travel lane/shoulder (14-foot-wide design) is proposed to be 12-foot-wide with an additional two feet distance from the median separation barrier.
- Access to part-time travel lane/shoulder could feature one entry and one exit.
- Part-time travel lane/shoulder could be classified as a high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lane during operating hours.
- Left shoulder operation is better suited for longer distance trips as it avoids traffic weaving at entrance and exit ramps.
- Combine with Freeway Service Patrol (continuously roving service/tow trucks) to reduce clearance times from incidents or disabled vehicles. Restoring traffic flow quickly reduces delays.
- Part-time travel lane/shoulder concept has proven successful in several other states.

## ESTIMATED COST – \$20 million

The cost varies depending on existing infrastructure and whether variable speed limits are incorporated.

## POTENTIAL FUNDING SOURCES

- State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP)
- Congestion Mitigation Air Quality (CMAQ)
- Regional Surface Transportation Program (RSTP)
- Local road impact fees

## SLOCOG'S PUBLIC OUTREACH

This highway segment is identified in SLOCOG's 2014 *US 101 Corridor Mobility Master Plan* as a high priority location for congestion relief. The plan included extensive public involvement with multiple local agency stakeholders. Project development team meetings and public input will continue during future project phases.

## ESTIMATED SCHEDULE

Construction start – winter 2024

Construction complete – winter 2026



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LOCAL

## Why Hwy. 101 traffic is so bad in Shell Beach — and how it could be fixed

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Naomi Kelly and Steve Vizzusi hike the hill carved to make way for Highway 101 in Shell Beach. Rush-hour congestion can be seen in the southbound lanes below. [DMIDDLECAMP@THETRIBUNENEWS.COM](mailto:DMIDDLECAMP@THETRIBUNENEWS.COM)

We can already hear the mocking laughter of jaded Angelenos.

“You call this traffic?” they ask incredulously, when anyone so much as suggests that Central Coast highways have become congested.

But yes, we do have traffic jams here in laid-back San Luis Obispo County.

Exhibit No. 1: The Shell Beach Straits — that oft-clogged, southbound stretch of Highway 101 between Avila Beach and Pismo Beach. Travel it around 5:30 p.m. on a Friday (or any weekday, for that matter) and you're bound to encounter bumper-to-bumper traffic — so much so that highway planners are taking a preliminary look at the intriguingly weird concept of creating a separate lane that would be used only during rush hours.

That's one of several fixes being studied, in a joint effort by Caltrans and the San Luis Obispo Council of Governments, or SLOCOG, which is the agency that decides how to use the county's share of regional transportation funds.

Trouble is, those funds are in seriously short supply, so there's no telling when actual work on the Shell Beach bottleneck could begin. However, alternatives are being evaluated so that a project will be ready to go when and if funds become available.

That will be a relief to locals, who have been dealing with this headache for years.

Officialdom also has ranked the stretch of highway as one of the worst in the county. Ron DeCarli, SLOCOG's executive director, said it gets D's and F's in highway rankings, and according to a Highway 101 Mobility Study for San Luis Obispo County, the Shell Beach Straits is the No. 1 "hot spot" in the county.

"Even folks that live in the North County recognized that," said Caltrans senior planner Larry Newland, who attended public meetings where the study was discussed.

It's so bad that drivers often try alternate routes, such as Highway 227 and the Shell Beach frontage road, but that's contributing to congestion on those arteries. As a result, alternate routes are not necessarily much faster.

So why, exactly, is traffic so bad along the 5-mile-long Shell Beach Straits, when just a mile or two to the south or north it's generally fine?

Theories abound.

One time-honored idea: Motorists traveling south on Highway 101 have been so starved for a sight of the Pacific (there is no ocean view along Highway 101 between here and the Bay Area) that when they catch the first glimpse of sea just south of Avila Beach, drivers slow down to gaze in wonder.



But regular commuters tend to blame the backed-up traffic on the auxiliary lane that starts at Avila Beach. It was intended to be a truck-climbing lane, so slow-moving vehicles wouldn't impede the faster-moving cars making the uphill climb just south of Avila Beach. However, the far right lane isn't used just by trucks. Impatient drivers move over there, too, to avoid slowing traffic. But because the lane ends a short distance later, they soon have to merge back into traffic — often to the chagrin of other motorists.

Even when the auxiliary lane ends and traffic gets (somewhat) back to normal, it's not clear sailing. Traffic often slows again, and doesn't really clear up until past Pismo Beach. Planners suggest there may be too many on- and off-ramps in the area, which makes for lots of weaving in and out of lanes.

A variety of alternatives for relieving congestion are being explored, as described in a SLOCOG staff report presented in June:

- Reconfiguring the ramp at Mattie Road. That would involve closing the existing Dinosaur Caves Park southbound on-ramp and creating a new southbound on-ramp at the Mattie Road undercrossing. It would also include adding an auxiliary lane from the new on-ramp to Dolliver Street.
- Extending the auxiliary, truck-climbing lane that starts at Avila Beach either to the Shell Beach Road exit or beyond. That way, motorists traveling to Shell Beach or Pismo Beach — or those who simply want to get off the freeway for a few minutes to gawk at the ocean — could stay in the auxiliary lane all the way to the exit, instead of having to merge back into traffic.
- Adding a “managed lane” that would be open only during rush hour. While there are no such lanes in California, other states use them, as well as some European nations.

The concept of the managed lane is simple enough: Allow the shoulder of the highway to be used as a traffic lane at the busiest times of the day.

In practice, though, it's not that easy: The shoulder has to be wide enough to accommodate traffic, which is an issue along the Shell Beach Straits. And the subsurface roadbed has to be able to stand up to increased traffic.

Those issues are being studied now; Caltrans is looking at both sides of the southbound highway to see which might better accommodate a managed lane. On the east side, “the

Pismo Rock is a pretty serious impediment,” said Newland. And on the west side, there’s the frontage road to worry about.

Another issue: How do you keep drivers from using the lane during nonrush hour?

Enforcement could be the key there, just as it is with carpool lanes. Ticket enough people using the managed lane illegally, and with the cost of fines being what they are, word should get out.

Newland pointed out that while the idea of a managed lane may seem strange, there was a time when roundabouts were regarded with even more skepticism. Twenty years ago, “you would get laughed out of the room” for suggesting a roundabout, he recalled, adding that now they’re commonplace.

Whatever solution is ultimately selected for the Shell Beach Straits, it could be years — if not decades — before it’s actually built, given the planning, environmental review and funding hurdles to overcome.

Until then, we can only offer commuters this obvious bit of advice: Try to leave work early (or late) enough to avoid the evening rush hour, which is generally between 5 and 6 p.m. But don’t hold us to that — we’ve seen traffic get bad as early as 4:45 p.m.

And when you can’t avoid it, be patient. As any Angeleno will tell you, there are worse places to be stuck in traffic.

## **IS IT 'STRAIGHTS' OR 'STRAITS'?**

CHP officers and dispatchers use the term “Shell Beach Straights (or Straits)” to refer to the stretch of Highway 101 between Avila Beach and Price Canyon Road in Pismo Beach. Transportation planners and news media, particularly radio, also have adopted the term. But since it’s used primarily in spoken communication, it’s hard to know whether it’s “straight” or “strait.” We queried a couple of authorities — the CHP and SLOCOG — about the proper spelling, but they didn’t have definitive answers.

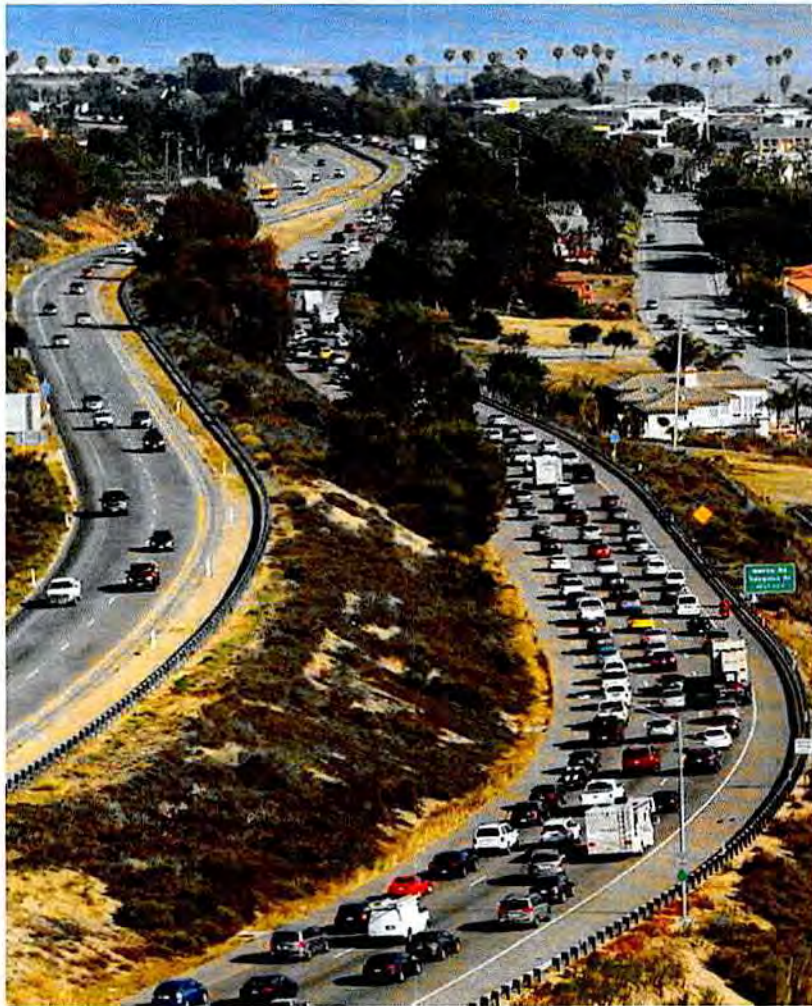
In a way, both spellings make sense.

The highway is “straight” in that area.



On the other hand, that particular stretch also is a “strait” in the sense that it’s a restricted, narrow passage, especially in the section where the auxiliary lane ends, forcing traffic to merge. “Straits” also has a nice nautical ring.

So for this story, at least, we’re using literary license and going with Shell Beach Straits. But who knows? Someday, when improvements make the traffic situation less dire, we may reconsider and call it a “straight.”



Passage of Proposition 6, the gas tax repeal, could delay regional highway projects in San Luis Obispo County, including congestion relief for Highway 101 through Shell Beach. [DMIDDLECAMP@THETRIBUNENEWS.COM](mailto:DMIDDLECAMP@THETRIBUNENEWS.COM)