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Traffic fines to double on stretch of Vasco Road

By Sean Maher
 Contra Costa Times
 Posted: 12/30/2011 04:58:58 PM PST
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Traffic fines will double starting Sunday on a stretch of road connecting Contra Costa and Alameda counties that sees about 20,000 cars every day, in what officials describe as just one part in a larger, ongoing effort to make that area safer.

The stretch of Vasco Road, long the focus of safety efforts because of its history of fatal collisions, runs between the Interstate 580 junction in Alameda County and the Walnut Boulevard intersection in Brentwood. The double-fine status was put in place in 2003, but expired two years ago and had to be ratified again by the state and both counties. It will last five years, until Jan. 1, 2017.

In addition to the fine zone being renewed, work is wrapping up on safety improvements that have taken more than a year to complete.

Workers installed a concrete median along a one-mile stretch about three miles north of the county line, according to Contra Costa County engineer Christopher Lau, who has spent several years working on road safety projects in the area.

The project took about two years to complete and cost \$11 million, he said.

"Were there bumps in the road? Sure. But this project is probably, in terms of size, the dollar amount, one of our bigger projects that we've delivered, and we pulled it off," Lau said.

Contra Costa County Supervisor Federal Glover, of Pittsburg, praised the project as a much-needed adaptation to the changing needs of the region.

"Vasco Road was

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not originally designed as a major commuters' route," Glover said. "It is one of those winding country roads that was fine when East County was just ranches and farms. Now that East County has become more developed, Vasco needs to change to accommodate its new role as a major connector, linking the suburbanized eastern part of Contra Costa with the job centers in the Tri-Valley and Silicon Valley."

Several high-profile fatal accidents spurred public concern about the safety of the area, Lau said.

Though the roadway actually has fewer collisions each year than the statewide average for a road with its traffic, public anxiety about Vasco runs high because of the severity of the crashes that do happen, Lau said.

Common safety issues include limited visibility around turns and the potential for head-on collisions in stretches where the medians are considered "soft" -- that is, where lanes running in opposite directions are separated only by flexible yellow-and-white plastic poles.

Between 1996 and 2006, according to the most recent California Highway Patrol data the county used, Vasco had 330 crashes, the highest number happening in 2003, when there were 41 collisions. Six of the 330 included at least one fatality, with 16 people dying in collisions between 1996 and August 2003, when some safety efforts began, Lau said.

The new median closed out the first phase of a larger project to improve traffic safety in the area, Lau said.

Among other improvements already completed are new double-yellow no-passing lanes, rumble strips added to the median and improved visibility around some curves, Lau said.

Still to be done, however, is the second phase of the project, which includes another 4 1/2 miles of concrete median

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Vehicles drive past the new concrete barrier section on Vasco Road between Brentwood and...

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...to be done, however, is the second phase of the project, which includes another 1/2 miles of concrete median to the north of what has already been installed. Currently, that phase is planned to require \$18 million and isn't funded.

An application last year for help from the last of the federal stimulus dollars failed, and project planners are awaiting the results of a recent application to the state for grant funding.

Contact Sean Maher at 925-779-7189. Follow him at [Twitter.com/OneSeanMaher](https://twitter.com/OneSeanMaher).

Crashes between 1996 and 2006

A history of collisions

Crashes on Vasco tend to be more severe than on comparable roads.

Fatalities between 1996 and Aug. 2003

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Since the story fails to mention it, the legislation (AB 348) to make the Safety Enhancement-Double Fine Zone's restoration possible was authored by Assemblymember Joan Buchanan. http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/cgi-bin/postquery?bill_number=ab_348&sess=CUR&house=B&author=buchanan

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Richard Holcomb

The problem was Contra Costa County put no planning into all the development they put in the east county. Marsh Creek Rd. is another example of a winding country road that has way too much traffic. We all know the infrastructure should be put in years ago as the east county grew. Dollars trump common sense everytime.

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