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The Big Fix: Caltrans may try 'rapid repair' method on other state freeways

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California's top highway official said the first week of Interstate 5 closures for the Big Fix went so smoothly – and commuters responded so well – the state may try more "rapid repair" freeway projects elsewhere.

"This is an effective way to get these jobs done with minimal disruption and reduced cost," a pleased state Transportation Department Director Will Kempton said Sunday.

The freeway's northbound lanes reopened with minimum fuss Monday morning at 2 a.m.

The first cars kicked up white concrete dust as they cruised through, some honking horns.

In what was seen as an experiment, officials shut down part of one of the busiest freeway stretches in the region during a commute week. Crews dug out the old road, replaced pipes and drains, added pumps and wells, and poured new pavement.

The ambitious closure idea, suggested by contractor C.C. Myers of Rancho Cordova, allows a major project to be done in weeks or months, rather than the year or more of piecemeal lane closures once almost a Caltrans trademark, state officials said.

Kempton, who has been pushing to speed Caltrans' road work, described it as a "get in, get it fixed, get out" approach.

The strategy will be tested again on I-5 at the end of the week. A second closure, this time of the southbound lanes, is scheduled for Friday night through Monday, June 23.

Alternating closures should end by July 15, officials said.

Congestion during the initial closure was lighter than expected, to state officials' relief.

"I can't stress enough how big a role the public plays in these things," Kempton said. "It's the public that gets the kudos here. They paid attention and took appropriate action."

The Sacramento experience, officials said, adds to a growing body of evidence in California that motorists – when forewarned – can at least temporarily change commute habits to avoid major traffic meltdowns.

Traffic was similarly light in the Bay Area over the three-day Labor Day weekend last year when Caltrans closed the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge.

Many vehicles also seemed to disappear from roads for weeks in Los Angeles during the 1984 Summer Olympics, after predictions the city would be hit with gridlock.

Officials wondered whether Sacramento – where public transit is skeletal and rivers limit access to downtown – could respond similarly to San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Traffic counts indicate they did. Half of commuters who typically drive Interstate 5 into downtown changed their commute during the week.

That includes starting earlier or later, taking transit or carpooling, working from home and taking days off.

Even some commuters from the north avoided the freeway, despite the open lanes in the southbound direction.

The region's transportation planning chief, Mike McKeever of the Sacramento Area Council of Governments, called the project a "huge experiment in transportation management" that's so far shown Sacramento's freeways, transit systems and commuters are more resilient than expected.

University of California, Davis, researchers have signed on to study short- and long-term project effects, including how many commuters stick with new travel patterns after the freeway project.

Planners said lessons from the Big Fix could help them better plan future road and transit systems.

Caltrans officials had said "worst case" delays could reach an hour on some freeways. Estimates from last week indicate morning commute delays on I-5 were often in the five- to 10-minute range.

Although Highway 99 and the Capital City Freeway through midtown saw heavy traffic, flow on normally congested Highway 50 at times resembled traffic of a decade ago.

Officials were surprised, however, by afternoon backups around 16th Street, where, at its worst, traffic took an hour for what typically takes 10 minutes. City officials responded by dispatching police to overrule red lights and wave traffic through.

The other major uncertainty – could construction crews handle an ambitious 10-day deadline for the first closure? – resolved itself.

Crews first had to overcome unexpected problems in replacing the top concrete slab of the freeway. Officials thought the slab was 6 to 9 inches thick, but found it was 24 inches at some places. Also, they discovered the top layer at points bonded to underlying slab, making it difficult to pull up the roadway.

Caltrans documents from the original construction in the late 1960s didn't reveal those issues.

Myers and Caltrans officials said they don't yet know how much it cost to bring in the extra crews, concrete and equipment.

Myers won the contract with a \$27 million bid and stands to earn up to \$3.1 million in incentives if he finishes the closure portion of the project by July 15.

Under the existing agreement, state officials will determine what extra costs are Caltrans' responsibility because of pre-existing issues in the freeway, such as the bonding between the slabs.

"They didn't put everything down in detail in those days, not like today," Myers said. To compensate, "we had double the crews from what we anticipated."