

Roadshow: New bicycle bridge over I-280 is striking span

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Mercury News

Posted: 04/30/2009 12:00:00 AM PDT

Updated: 04/30/2009 09:45:02 AM PDT

Silicon Valley has a brand new landmark, one that promises to attract the attention of anyone motoring down Interstate 280 through Cupertino and Sunnyvale.

The Mary Avenue pedestrian and bicycle bridge opens today, and while the large, white span held up by 44 cables is striking during the day, you should check it out at night. That's when it will really glow, with lights illuminating the 90-foot-tall, 325-foot-long structure that crosses 11 freeway lanes. Think mini-Bay Bridge.

"It's pretty spectacular," said Ralph Qualls, Cupertino's public works director.

"It's a striking, iconic image that will become a landmark for Cupertino and Silicon Valley," said John Brazil, head of the bicycle and pedestrian program in neighboring San Jose.



"I am delighted that both the bridge and the approach ramps have been designed so beautifully," added Don Burnett, a former Cupertino city councilman who led the fight to build the span. "It's wonderful to add such a delightful place to our community, a green symbol for Silicon Valley in the 21st century."

For months, Roadshow readers have inquired about the bridge as it rose into the sky just east of Highway 85, many asking if it was a new freeway interchange. No, and its construction is a case of the car culture losing to bicyclists, joggers and walkers in an era when the car was king and the region was on a massive freeway-building binge.

Back in the early 1970s, as I-280 was being built, state plans called for an auto bridge over the freeway to link traffic on Mary Avenue in Cupertino to the same street in Sunnyvale. This was two decades before Highway 85 would be completed, and traffic on nearby streets like De Anza Boulevard was a mess.

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But residents in both cities feared a bridge would only make traffic worse in their neighborhoods, and they fought the idea fiercely. Mary Avenue residents turned out in droves at a community meeting at the Flint Center.

Caltrans engineers presented their plans for construction of the overpass, but before the night was over, the audience gave the project a near unanimous thumbs-down, said spokesman Rick Kitson. The Cupertino City Council subsequently withdrew its endorsement and the project died.

The result was a very wide Mary Avenue ending abruptly at large dirt embankments on both sides of the freeway.

For Burnett, a Lockheed engineer who bicycled to work each day when few others did, an idea popped into his head. Why not a footbridge to encourage more bicycling and walking?

The idea didn't take hold immediately, but after Burnett won a seat on the City Council, he had some clout. In 1998 — more than two decades after the initial bridge for cars was killed — the city formally began pushing for the bicycle crossing. Shortly after, the Valley Transportation Authority gave the idea a thumbs-up, ranking it as its top bicycle project, one that would close a big gap in a regional bike path along the Stevens Creek Trail.

The cost was high. At \$15 million, it's believed to be the most expensive span of its type in the South Bay. Sunnyvale opened two pedestrian bridges along Borregas Avenue over highways 101 and 237 last week for about the same price for both.

The cost irks some people, like Ray Hosler of Santa Clara. He "snapped a chain" when he saw the \$15 million bill. "And I'm a daily bicycle commuter," he said. "I have puzzled over this bridge to nowhere for

a long time. You see, only four-tenths of a mile away there's Stelling Road crossing I-280, with a bike lane, no less. Traffic is light to moderate.

"As cyclists we need to pick our battles. We don't get much pork-barrel money thrown our way."

Not so fast, countered bicyclist Anne Ng of Cupertino: "It's a mile out of the way to get to Stelling and back, which is much more of a consideration when traveling at human-powered speed. Also, the bridge provides a pleasant, low-stress route that avoids the sometimes hectic Stelling-Homestead Road intersection."

Studies indicate that 265,000 people will use the bridge each year, 175,000 of them cyclists. And best of all, 35,000 of those will be commuters opting to leave their cars, vans and SUVs in the garage.

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BIKE BRIDGE OPENING

The Mary Avenue bridge will open today after a 3 p.m. ceremony at Meteor Drive and Mary Avenue in Cupertino. Limited parking will be available on Mary Avenue south of Lubek Street, but carpooling, biking and walking are encouraged. From 1 p.m., Mary Avenue will be closed at Lubek, and Meteor will be closed west of Nathanson Avenue. Both streets will reopen immediately after the ceremony, about 4:30 p.m.

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