

Transportation- Current Day



By Sandy Baer

Most often the 44,000 residents in San Luis Obispo drive an automobile, but they also arrive by train, bus, plane and bicycle. We have 125 miles of city streets in a 10.7-acre land area surrounded by the peaks of the Santa Lucia Mountains. Santa Rosa, Palm, Nipomo and Pacific Streets border the downtown core. Nearly 600 businesses are licensed within this district.

When Mayor Dave Romero moved to town in 1956, the city's population was 17,000. "The only stoplight in town was at Chorro and Higuera Streets," Romero remembers. "During the fifties we saw a large increase in traffic in San Luis Obispo. The downtown streets were all two-way which inherently causes more traffic congestion."

Romero continues, "Three factors contributed to the greatly increased needs for traffic capacity on our streets in the fifties. Cal Poly began a major expansion when it allowed female students. The California Men's Colony became a maximum-security prison and increased its population. And Cuesta College was established."



In 30 years, between 1920 and 1950, motor vehicle registration in San Luis Obispo County increased from 4,350 to 27,594, with more than a 48 percent increase between 1940 and 1950.

"I immediately recognized that the city needed a master plan and that major streets had to be addressed," Romero says. During his tenure, Romero implemented the one-way streets downtown, started the tree program and earned the nickname "Dave the Pave." "One of my favorite projects was overseeing the construction of the Johnson Street underpass which was just a narrow two-lane road when we started."

"Good streets are part of our quality of life," Romero says. "I'm particularly concerned that we are losing the level of street maintenance that we once had. We've been trying to play catch up but the city and state are hopelessly behind. We never have enough dollars due particularly to the state cutbacks."

And where do all of these cars go but in search of parking places? According to Tim Bochum, Deputy Public Works Director, "Parking has always been a problem downtown. The city first formed a parking district on April 16, 1958 to collect parking fees. Those funds were used to buy parking lots and then to build structures."

In the 1970s the city created the parking enterprise fund, one of five such enterprise

funds with city government. (The others are transit, also under the auspices of the Public Works Department as well as water, sewer and the municipal golf course.)

"The money in the fund is dedicated to the annual parking operations and enforcement," Bochum says. Income is largely from parking meters and fines and also includes money from passes and parking leases. The city

issues about 40,000 parking citations a year citywide, which includes red curbs outside of the downtown district as well as residential parking districts.

The newest parking structure on Morro and Palm Streets is scheduled to open this spring. Dubbed by staff as "919" for its Palm Street address, the ground level is an open air garage for city public works vehicles and the second floor will house the Public Works and Planning Departments' staffs.

The top floors will be parking for commercial and non-commercial users. "The philosophy is to put cars in garages and off the streets," Bochum says. "The building was designed to convert to all office space if downtown parking demands are to change."

"The fund has been very healthy for a number of years, but when we undertake a big project like the parking garage at Morro and Palm Streets, it dips down of course." Currently, two-million is budgeted annually to operate downtown parking lots and garages that includes the cost of attendants, security and maintenance.

Four years ago, the department began a downtown parking space inventory to collect and analyze data. In all after "919" is open, there will be three downtown parking structures with 1,177 spaces. Public lots with meters offer 336 spaces and there are 1,121 on street curbside meters.

There are another 1,100 non-metered on-street parking spaces and approximately 4,160 private parking places in the downtown core. There are two downtown parking zones: the central core has the highest rate for parking while the secondary downtown core has a mix of two and 10-hour meters. There are 13 parking lots downtown, the first four purchased before the parking district was formed, according to Bochum.

"We saw a pick-up in garage parking this last year and we were at capacity (98 percent) during the holidays," Bochum says. "Until the Marsh Street expansion, both Palm and Marsh Street garages were very busy and often full."

Bus service is another transportation alternative. According to Austin O'Dell, Transit Manager for the city, "In 1999, bus service



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began a downward trend. Our schedules were difficult to read and the busses weren't on time."

"We knew we had to make some changes to get service reliability back on board," O'Dell, who began his duties in 2000, continues. "We addressed those issues by designing new schedules, for instance."

"The Mass Transit Committee received more than 220 comments and recommendations." Those recommendations included an easy-to-remember "memory schedule" and a Cal Poly circulator route. The City administers our mass transit program but contracts for bus operations and maintenance.

"We have a good core service and now we need to expand on it to accommodate our ridership increases," O'Dell says. Overall ridership increased 29 percent from 2004 to 2005 and Cal Poly student riders increased 41 percent. Ridership hit 88,000 one day in October 2004, then peaked at 108,000 a year later in October 2005.

"I really believe it's a quality service now and people are making a shift from their cars to public transit. We listened to the community at our public meetings and have tried to be responsive to their needs," O'Dell says. The City currently offers a fleet of 20 buses on eight different routes as well as the two Downtown Trolleys. New sophisticated electronic passes went into use in February.

Even though one half of the riders on city busses are Cal Poly students, we are also a bicycle-friendly city, in part in response to this population's diverse needs. The most recent annual bicycle count shows that in a two-hour period, 352 bikes passed through the intersection at Foothill and California, 77 at Marsh and Broad and 48 at the Jennifer Street Bridge.

According to Peggy Mandeville, principal transportation planner with the City's Public Works Department, "The City's 'circulation element' calls for a bicycle plan. Bicycle planning is an important transportation component, especially in a college town. By providing good bicycle transportation, we're taking cars off the highways and providing people an alternative way to travel."

There are three classes of bikeways: Class I are off street bike paths and we have 1.5 miles within the city. There are 25 miles of Class II that are striped bike lanes along city streets and Class III designates preferred routes for bicyclists such as the Bill Roalman Bicycle Boulevard on Morro Street from Santa Barbara to Pacific Streets.

Much as we need parking for cars we also need parking for bicycles downtown. "The City's bike back program is all paid through private donors," Mandeville says. The "Racks with Plaques" program allows private donors to purchase a bicycle rack with a plaque for installation in the downtown or parks.

Similar to the "Green Bench Program," it provides an opportunity for community residents to contribute to our quality of life. The Public Works Department along with local resident and bike rack designer, Rod Hoadley, of the Hoadley Design Group, developed the program.

The unique bike rack design features a staggered placement design for 2, 4, 6, or 8 bicycles. Racks range in price, which includes installa-

tion and the permanent engraved brass plaque, from \$975 to \$1750 for an 8-bike rack.

"The City also requires private developers to provide for bicycle along with vehicle parking," Mandeville says. "In addition, we want to provide the right locations." In 1999 there were 274 bike parking spaces downtown. By 2003, we had 404 spaces and by the end of 2005 we had 444 spaces.

Whether by bicycle, bus or automobile, local residents, commuters and tourists bear down on San Luis Obispo city streets daily. According to Mayor Romero, in the 1970s the city's planning process changed from growth to no-growth.

"Now we are hopelessly behind trying to keep up with our transportation needs," Romero says. On the other hand, we are a long way from the carriage-rutted mud lane called Higuera Street when our city incorporated in 1856.

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