

## Where's the relief?

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**By Gary Richards**  
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When the bottleneck on Interstate 880 near Brokaw Road was unplugged two months ago with the addition of a third lane, traffic experts said it would shave 18 minutes off the afternoon southbound commute.

Hah!

Instead of saving time, commutes have lengthened by perhaps 18 minutes. Where traffic once thinned out past Highway 101, the freeway has turned into a solid sea of red brake lights from 4:30 to as late as 9 p.m.

"It's been a zoo," said Nicole Crotchett of Felton, one of a chorus of I-880 users dumbfounded by the increased gridlock. "Near the 101 connection, everybody for some reason seems to lose their brains."

But there's hope.

A new, short merging lane may open on southbound I-880 this weekend. The extra pavement will run just nine-tenths of a mile, from Old Bayshore Road to First Street.

It may be short on pavement, but long on promise.

The new lane will allow drivers entering the freeway at Old Bayshore to gradually merge onto 880 instead of having only 100 feet before diving madly into the slow lane. While more cars on the road gets part of the blame for the tie-ups, the lack of adequate merging space seems the big culprit, especially in the area of 101-880.

"What slows traffic down at any interchange area is merging," said Les Bishop of the California Highway Patrol, who says he "saw this coming. I knew it wasn't going to get too much better."

But, he adds, "if you give people more space to merge, it will be an improvement."

Temporary lane lines and orange pylons used during construction will be gone. Bishop believes they've added to the slowing, as confused drivers begin tapping their brakes, not sure where the current merge lane ends.

The \$73 million project widened the freeway from four to six lanes between Montague Expressway and 101. But a month of persistent rain delayed paving for the merging lane. Final striping is under way, and if rains hold off work should end this weekend.

Not any too soon for Norman Smith and Jeff Henderson, commuters making the East Bay to San Jose trek home each night. Smith says it takes him 20 minutes on the 17-mile, northbound morning commute from Camden Avenue to Stevenson Boulevard. At night, the same trek stretches out for 43 minutes. Ditto Henderson.

"It's horrible," said Henderson, a 41-year-old mechanical engineer at Thermawave in Fremont. "When you get to Brokaw, it's just like a brick wall."

So much so that he stopped using the wider freeway, taking I-680 to get home at night.

No counts have been tallied to see how much additional traffic has been lured onto I-880 since the extra lanes were opened in November. But a good guess is that 2,000 extra vehicles are battling for space in the extra lane on I-880 between 5 and 6 p.m. each night, the limit that one mile of highway can accommodate.

And there's another problem.

“They need metering lights at Montague,” said Henderson, noting that cars are pouring unimpeded from the expressway onto the freeway. Alas, Caltrans says it will be at least a year before signals are operational at on-ramps at Montague, Brokaw and Old Bayshore.

A bright note: the northbound drive has been a breeze, with most drivers saying they have trimmed 10 to 20 minutes off morning commutes in that direction. There's no construction on that side of the road, and metering lights are working along almost the entire Highway 17-Interstate 880 corridor from Los Gatos to Santa Clara, controlling the flow of cars onto the freeway.

Now, frustrated southbound drivers can only hope that a short merging lane will deliver the tall promise of relief. “I hope it is going to help. I like to be optimistic,” said Crotchett, adding that after two months of sitting in idling traffic: “I'll believe it when I see it.”

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