

South Bay Expressway finally unveiled after years of planning

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SOUTH BAY — After decades of planning, the South Bay Expressway, otherwise known as state Route 125, opens between Otay Mesa and Spring Valley on Monday.

The \$635 million, 9.3-mile north-south toll road, which will start with two lanes in each direction, will run from state Route 905 near the international border to Route 54 in Spring Valley before the SR-125 freeway takes over on the trip to Santee.

The four-lane highway features interchanges at Otay Mesa Road/SR-905, Birch Road, Olympic Parkway, Otay Lakes/Telegraph Canyon Road, East H Street, San Miguel Ranch

Road and finally to SR-54. The toll road has sufficient right-of-way that two more lanes in each direction could be built at some future date.

A signature structure of the toll road project is the Otay River Bridge. At three-quarters of a mile long and nearly 19 stories at its peak, the bridge's concrete superstructure was pre-cast in Perris, Calif., before the segments were driven to the site.

Because this segmental construction method allows the bridge to be assembled from above, it minimizes impact on the sensitive Otay River Valley floor below.

The substructure for the bridge is made up of 11 sets of dual columns. The segments each weigh between

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50 tons to 70 tons, and measure about 35 feet wide and 10-16 feet tall.

A total of 644 segments were lifted from a launching pad and fitted into place on top of the supporting columns by a large overhead gantry.

The bridge is supported by 470 miles of post-tensioning strand — enough to reach from San Diego to San Francisco support the bridge.

Each strand, in turn, is strong enough to support 30 tons, or the weight of a fully loaded concrete mixer truck.

Each pair of columns rests on a rectangular pile cap 75 feet wide, 50 feet long and 10 feet thick, that took more than 100 concrete trucks to pour. The foundations for each column extend 85 feet into the ground.

The South Bay Expressway was financed with bank loans, a \$140 million federal loan facility from the U.S. Department of Transportation under the TIFIA (Transportation Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act of 1998) program and private-equity capital.

Additionally, area developers dedicated \$48 million in right-of-way to the project.

The northern end includes the widening of SR-54 and the con-

struction of a connection from the existing SR-125 to the toll road. This 3-mile portion was bank-rolled by SANDAG for about \$138.5 million.

South Bay Expressway is a development of **California Transportation Ventures**, a wholly owned subsidiary of **Macquarie Infrastructure Group** of Australia.

The project was built by **Otay River Constructors**, a joint venture of the **Fluor Corp.** (NYSE: FLR) and **Washington Group International** (NYSE: WMG).

While the South Bay Expressway will utilize a FasTrak system, the expressway's fees will not be based on the level of congestion unlike the high-occupancy vehicle lanes on the Interstate 15. Instead, they will be flat fees ranging from as little as 75 cents for short distances, to \$3.50 for the full length of the thoroughfare. Motorists will have the option of paying their fees electronically or at toll plazas along the route.

Trucks with three or four axles will pay twice the normal toll. Those with five or more axles will be charged three times the automobile rate.

For cash-paying customers driving the full length of the road, toll attendants at the Otay Mesa Toll plaza will provide change.

Customers will toss coins into the cash-acceptance machine, watch for the green light and drive through.

South Bay Expressway's on/off ramps will also accept bills for those who don't have coins. All motorists are being invited to take a free, unlimited test drive from Nov. 19-Dec. 2.

"The Grand Opening 'Free for All' and 'FasTrak Drives Free' promotions are our way of saying 'Thank You' to the community for their support," South Bay Expressway CEO Greg Hulsizer said. "This special promotion gives everyone the opportunity to check out South Bay Expressway for themselves and see how it can save them time, money and relieve the stress of bumper-to-bumper traffic."

Hulsizer said the tolls will be high enough that congestion usually shouldn't be a problem. These tolls are expected to be in place for the next 35 years until the road can be paid off. The expressway then becomes the property of Caltrans.

Those electing to use the South Bay Expressway rather than standard freeways may expect to see a substantial reduction in their commute times. Once open, the expressway is expected to reduce the drive time from SR-54 to Otay Mesa from the 30 minutes commonplace today to as little as 10 minutes.

It has not been easy getting to this point. The link was originally placed on highway maps as far back as 1959. That map had projected the highway segment might be completed by the end of the 1970s.

The San Diego Association of Governments included the link as part of its transportation plan in 1984, but the agency simply couldn't come up with the funds.

California Transportation Ventures took up the mantle at the beginning of the 1990s and in 1991 formed a community advisory committee composed of 30 area civic, environmental, planning, chambers of commerce and homeowners groups to keep the public informed of the road's progress. It then took 11 more years, multiple environmental impact reports, and approvals from state and federal wildlife agencies before the project could go forward.

The South Bay Expressway also funded a \$7 million, state-of-the-art, six-field athletic complex for the Sweetwater Valley Little League as well.

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