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Rush to open

Toll road fails environmental, safety standards

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An \$800 million toll road through the South County is three weeks away from opening. Yet, it is out of compliance with environmental regulations for storm water runoff and is potentially unsafe under rainy conditions.

The county's first toll road, known as state Route 125 or the South Bay Expressway, is 13 months late and rushing toward a Nov. 19 announced opening date.

South Bay Expressway, the toll road operator, and Caltrans, which must certify the highway, have been in discussions for more than a year with the San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board, although the compliance issues have not been disclosed to the public.

The new highway is in violation of standards to keep barren slopes from eroding and to filter pollutants from storm runoff before it reaches drainage systems.

The water quality board weakened its standards for South Bay Expressway so as not to delay its opening further. Yet, after a Sept. 18 field inspection, Executive Director John Robertus wrote, "There was little, if any, evidence of attempts to begin vegetation establishment in any of the 38 proposed bio-swales or 14 extended basins located along the toll road." Robertus warned the two bodies "the potential violations ... may subject your joint entity to possible future enforcement action by the regional board."

At issue, basically, is that no landscaping has been put in and that the highway's nude slopes and medians could erode substantially in a severe rainstorm, overwhelming drains and flooding the road surface.

Further, modern best practices call for bio-swales, earthen hollows, to be planted with thick salt grass to filter out brake pad dust, dissolved metals and oils before they reach the storm water drainage system. Instead, the toll road builder intends to install rolls of fibrous material as a temporary measure.

In a county now covered with ash, some might scoff at the threat of brake dust, metal flakes and oil merging with sources of drinking water or being inflicted upon wild creatures. There is a safety issue as well, the potential for drivers to suddenly hit mud slicks at 65 miles an hour.

The toll road company is under immense pressure to open in time to support the holiday shopping season. New shopping centers in eastern Chula Vista have been dying on the vine for 13 months or more without a transportation link.

The highway's importance can hardly be overstated. It will serve the Otay Ranch shopping mall, three high schools, and will be the most direct route for 1,300 employees commuting to a state prison. It is a natural for trucks entering at the Otay Mesa border crossing and could

facilitate an earlier opening of a third border crossing. The new route is expected to cut Interstate 805 traffic 20 percent to 25 percent.

“Never has so much been expected of one road,” said Greg Hulsizer, South Bay Expressway CEO.

Caltrans has as many as 16 inspectors on site yet is inexplicably looking the other way on environmental and potential safety violations. That is appalling.

South Bay Expressway and Caltrans need to level with the public as to what has gone wrong with this highway, including why so much is still unfinished 13 months after its original opening date. The San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board should not be skittish about protecting the public, including initiating the formal sanctions process if necessary.

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Yes, but at a minimum Californians expect their new highways to comply with the law and to be safe. Sadly, with the South Bay Expressway, there is no assurance that either is the case.