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- [SPORTS](#)
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- [ENTERTAINMENT](#)
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- [SPECIAL SECTIONS](#)
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Thursday, May. 22, 2008

New phase starts on Highway 99 upgrades north of Atwater

Crossings closed, more lanes added and a new overpass is being built in 3-year project.

By SCOTT JASON
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ATWATER -- Caltrans began work on another part in the plan to improve the stretch of Highway 99 through Merced County.

The \$43 million project will widen about two miles of the highway from north of Atwater to Arena Way.

Also, a new interchange will be built at Westside Boulevard. Four at-grade crossings will also be eliminated. Work is expected to finish in spring 2011, Caltrans spokeswoman Lisa Balcom said.

The project is being funded by Proposition 1B, the \$19.9 billion transportation bond passed by voters November 2006.

The construction picks up where Caltrans' work south of Livingston ended earlier this year. The highway was rebuilt to hold six lanes of traffic, though it's still restricted to four lanes so bottlenecks aren't created.

The Sultana Drive interchange was also constructed as part of the project.

The ultimate goal is to revamp Highway 99 so that it can allow for more traffic and growth. The state plans to make the highway six lanes wide from Sacramento through Bakersfield.

Once Caltrans finishes in Atwater, they'll work on Highway 99 from Mission Avenue to Madera County, said Jesse Brown, executive director of the Merced County Association of Governments. That work is also being funded by the proposition.

No money has been found to widen the highway through the city limits of Livingston, Atwater and Merced, he said.

Brown reckoned that Caltrans will open the six lanes from south of Livingston to Atwater once the

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current project is finished.

It will relieve some congestion and increase safety along that stretch, he said.

Reporter Scott Jason can be reached at (209) 385-2453 or sjason@mercedsun-star.com.

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