

COMMENTARY

Remodeled road good for drivers and wildlife

At six lanes and with traffic zooming by, it's clear the extension of Clinton Keith Road in Murrieta is meant to make life easier for people.



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The great thing is that we didn't forget about wildlife.

The project includes a giant wildlife overcrossing intended to let animals safely continue their travels, too.

The extension, from Vista Murrieta High School to near Winchester Road, opened recently and already has traffic lights. It's obviously going to lead to more economic activity and will make commuting easier.

Yet the busy road also passes through a Western Riverside County Multispecies Habitat Conservation Plan reserve, and animals — just like people — have places to get to, too.

It's the first such overcrossing in southwest Riverside County, though there are several undercrossings that typically use drainage culverts, said Honey Bernas of the Western Riverside County Regional Conservation Authority.

Cameras will be installed at both ends of the crossing and under the Warm Springs Creek bridge to monitor wildlife use, Bernas said.

The overpass will be used by coyotes, deer, bobcats, skunks, raccoons and opossums, animals we've heard of, predicts Jonathan Reinig of the county.

"But Southern California is home to a rich diversity of unique, less recognizable, animals as well," he said.

Thus the rare and endangered crowd, the Los Angeles pocket mouse, San Diego blacktail jackrabbit, the western spadefoot frog, the Delzwa kangaroo rat and the Blainville's horned lizard, Reinig said.

Think of it this way: The overcrossing is helping a veritable Noah's Ark of our region survive. This time, though,

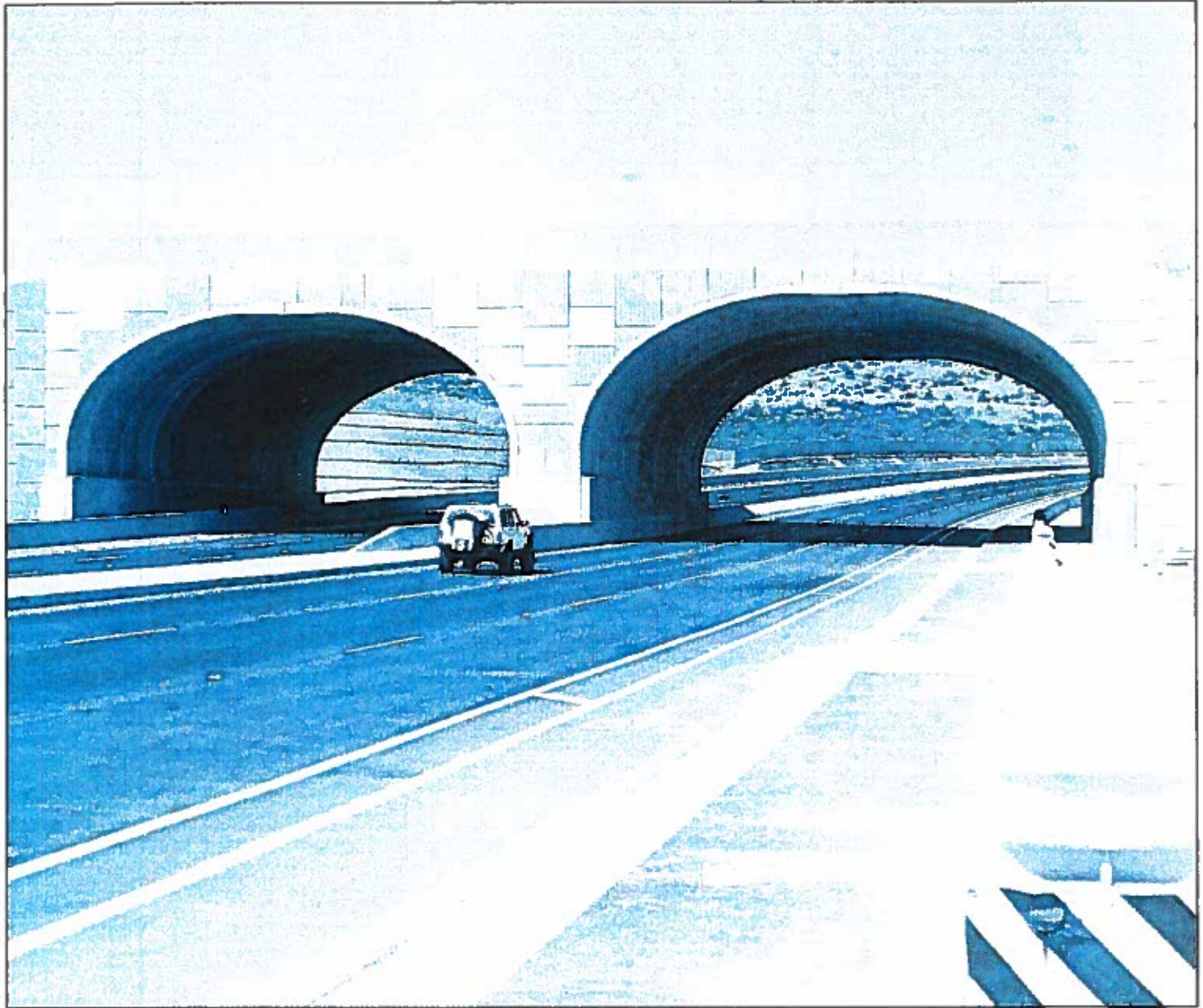


PHOTO BY CARL LOVE

Traffic moves on the new Clinton Keith Road extension in Murrieta. Animals can cross the busy road on an overcrossing built for them.

it's not a flood of water — it's a flood of development that threatens the animals.

"The Clinton-Keith overcrossing is a small piece of a much larger puzzle," Reinig said. "By designing a reserve system as an interconnected web that allows for the free movement of species, we greatly increase the chance for entire species to persist far into the future."

The new road is helping Tom

Patane's future, too.

He's the busy principal of nearby Dorothy McElhinney School, and after dropping off his kids at Vista Murrieta High School, the new Clinton Keith helps him get to his school in less than half the time it took him to drive the windier, and now less traveled, two-lane part of Los Alamos Road in eastern Murrieta.

Patane says he never realized how close the two schools

are "as the crow flies," thanks to the new extension. He thinks the wildlife bridge, which he calls massive, is a great idea.

His only question: "Did someone inform the animals that they're supposed to use the bridge to cross the road? With the increased speed on Clinton Keith, it makes it more dangerous for animals trying to cross, not to mention the danger it presents to drivers."

While phone calls, emails,

texts, letters and flyers are out of the question (Is it just me or do people have a lot of ways to communicate?), there is an elaborate fencing system that steers the animals to the bridge, Bernas said.

In other words, the animals are getting the message about this great new way to commute for them and for us.

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