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Highway 24 gridlock: Why no local notifications or traffic control?

By Nick Marnell



The reason for the major congestion Photo courtesy KTVU

investigation as the main reason for the traffic congestion. "So many steps have to be taken and followed," said CHP officer Brandon Correia. "The Sheriff's Office had to conduct quite a large investigation and collect evidence and photos. In some cases, such as this, we have to shut the freeway down to preserve the scene and all evidence."

The freeway stayed clogged for nearly six hours, with traffic funneled from five lanes to one at the Camino Pablo exit. Orinda and Lafayette residents received no alerts on Nixle, a community notification service provided by public agencies.

Correia said the CHP does not use Nixle, but neither did the Orinda or Lafayette police departments. "The city of Orinda or Orinda Police do not do Nixle alerts for the CHP," said Mark Nagel, Orinda chief of police. "This occurred in their jurisdiction. I know it was in Orinda, but all of the traffic matters fell to the CHP."

Nor was there any apparent traffic control on the highway. "For freeway control, we don't stand on the road and hand direct traffic," Correia said. "We use our cone patterns, flare patterns, and patrol vehicles' emergency lights to direct traffic." Nagel said that his officers were removed from the scene, per protocol. "CHP was on scene and doing traffic control for the entire incident," Nagel said.

The brunt of the congestion occurred in Lafayette, especially on the downtown streets. The CHP issued a Sigalert, a notification of a major traffic incident, but Correia said that the CHP did not expect the high level of traffic activity in the city or on the on-off ramps to the freeway. "I'm not sure if it was communicated to Lafayette Police how much of a backup from the on-off ramps was created into their city and what they could have possibly done or not done to assist with that," Correia said.

Which explains why Lafayette Police Chief Ben Alldritt, who relied on the Sigalert, did not issue a local Nixle notification. "But I will next time," Alldritt said. "It was a lesson learned by me about people's expectations."

Orinda officials also pledged to review their incident notification procedures. "We are aware of the issue, and the police chief and I are working on a way to better notify residents," said City Manager Steve Salomon.

Fire and medical responses in Lamorinda were not affected that day. The Contra Costa County Fire Protection District had no involvement with the incident, and the traffic had no impact on other responses that day, according to a district spokesman. And the Moraga-Orinda Fire District, the responding agency to the traffic accident, experienced no adverse impacts because of the congestion. "We always have the ability to respond," said MOFD Chief Dave Winnacker.

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