

# SOUNDWALL PAYS OFF:

## Residents along Highway 101 say noise has been reduced

by Mark Prado

Patrick Murphy of San Rafael likes what he doesn't hear. Crews are finishing the installation of thousands of sound-absorbing panels as part of a \$3 million retrofit of the existing Highway 101 soundwall to give area neighbors relief from freeway noise.

It's already making a difference.

"It's a significant change," said Murphy, who lives on Lincoln Hill in San Rafael and has lobbied Caltrans for more than a dozen years to improve the soundwalls. "The white noise that you hear is gone. What's missing is the 'shhhhhh.'"

Application of the 11,400 sound-absorbing panels along the mile stretch of the existing east soundwall has been going on for the past six months.

The white panels, which weigh 40 pounds each and measure 2-by-2 feet, are made of porous concrete to absorb sound. They are painted a shade of brown.

The \$3 million cost of retrofitting the existing soundwall was \$2 million less than it would have cost to rebuild the soundwall entirely, which was the original plan, officials said.

A new soundwall with similar but larger panels is being erected on the west side of Highway 101 in San Rafael as part of the \$200 million project to widen the freeway and create a bike and pedestrian path.

Residents who live on and near Lincoln Avenue have pushed for the soundwall panels for years to help ease freeway noise in their neighborhood.

"I walk my dog up the hill and by about a 3-to-1 margin, people are saying it is quieter," said resident Kingston Cole. "It's not perfect, but it's better. Before it was like the sound of a leaf blower 50 to 60 feet away; now it's like a small lawn mower 100 feet away.



Now we just want Caltrans to finish all the work and leave."

Locals have measured neighborhood noise at levels higher than 67 decibels; sound at or approaching that level in residential areas must be reduced under federal law. By comparison, the noise from a hair dryer is 70 decibels, a garbage disposal is 80, a lawnmower is 90 and a chainsaw is 100.

Murphy believes the panels have reduced the noise by 8 to 10 decibels.

"I began to notice the difference as they moved north with the work," he said.

In addition to the new panels, newly laid "open grade" asphalt on the freeway's roadway has also helped bring noise levels down. In addition to absorbing water, the roadway absorbs sound.

"The open grade road is more like popcorn that is stuck together," said Mike Ghilotti, president of Ghilotti Brothers Inc., which is doing the work. "It doesn't have the finer material that binds it together, so water doesn't bunch up and sound is also absorbed.



Top: Workers install 2x2 foot squares of Sound-Sorb® acoustical tiles to cover the existing Highway 101 reflective soundwall. Bottom: Area residents remove blankets covering their windows that were used to keep noise out.

"We're excited to hear it is helping. We've been following this for the last 10 years. I'm glad it's bringing some good results for the neighborhood."

Said Murphy: "It's a significant reduction – it's working."

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