

"We're From The Government..."

MOST OF YOU will recognize that sardonic little quote as one that ends, "...and we're here to help." It is supposed to be sarcastic, and funny, but like most truly funny things, the humor comes from the fact that it hits so close to the truth.

I apologize for the fact that the situation discussed here affects only California motorcyclists, however, in this case I believe that what happened here could easily be re-written about almost any other state, just by changing a few names.

Near where I live lies a 35-mile stretch of State Highway 74 that is commonly referred to as the "Ortega Highway." Running from the little coastal town of San Juan Capistrano, through the mountains to Lake Elsinore, the Ortega is, without a doubt, one of the finest motorcycling roads in the country. It is a narrow road, that squeezes down to as little as 12 feet wide on a couple of old, stone bridges. It is also a twisting, winding whoop-de-doo of a road, with wide sweepers, tight flatirons, decreasing-radius curves, and even a couple of fast "carousels," all while presenting the rider with magnificent canyon vistas, pine forests and overlooks. Motorcycle heaven.

Hundreds of motorcyclists ride the Ortega every weekend, and MCN and several other magazines often use it to test bikes, tires, suspension settings, etc. On any given day, you might see racers, engineers, designers and even executives from any of the major motorcycle manufacturers or aftermarket companies riding the Ortega. It is, in fact, so popular a riding venue that at least two roadhouses on the short route subsist primarily on two-wheeled customers.

Unfortunately, on weekday mornings and evenings, it is also the route used by approximately 14,000 commuters, and by a large number of commercial trucks.

Enter CalTrans, the California State Transportation Authority, charged with keeping our roadways safe and well-maintained. Suddenly, and with virtually no warning, CalTrans announced that they would be closing the Ortega for "safety improvements," for a period of about two-and-a-half years. You could practically feel the shockwave that ran through the local riding community, not to mention all those commuters, and the business owners along the route. There was immediate outcry for a meeting with CalTrans, in hopes of somehow stopping the project. At first, CalTrans refused, noting they had already held a "public forum," at which only about a dozen people had shown up. But when a local newspaper pointed out that the meeting had practically been held in secret, CalTrans



reluctantly scheduled another forum, which about 300 other people and I attended.

To say that the meeting was a mockery of the democratic process would be almost too kind. Though this was supposed to be a "public forum to address concerns," as soon as we were seated, we were informed that no questions or comments from the audience would be allowed. We were to sit quietly and listen to CalTrans tell us how things were going to be. And when several in the audience raised their voices in protest of this, a group of about 10 Highway Patrol officers immediately moved in to eject them from the hall. When this action angered the crowd to the point of near-riot, the CalTrans officials quickly recanted, and agreed to a question-and-answer session. It was a smart move, as that was the closest thing I've ever seen to the forming of a lynch mob.

Though CalTrans cited a six-year-old study, showing 54 deaths on the Ortega, as justification for the project, a member of the audience pointed out that the most recent figures showed only one fatal accident for the entire year on the 3.5-mile section proposed for "improvement." "Why," he asked, "would we spend 27.5 million dollars and suffer two-and-a-half-years of construction delays for an area that has seen only a single fatal accident in a year?"

The CalTrans response: "Because a single death is one death too many."

Another person pointed out that, "The widened and improved section, to allow better traffic flow, funnels down into a narrow, 10-ft.-wide bridge that is not going to be widened. Aren't we just creating a bottleneck that will make things much worse?"

The CalTrans response: "We can't do anything about that. The bridge is over the line into the next county, and we are only funded for repairs in this county."

Over and over again, audience participants pointed out huge flaws in the CalTrans statistics, and their reasoning—all to no avail other than to elicit the repeated response, "We'll look into that." Of course the big question was, why didn't they "look into that" before going ahead?

The Project Manager repeatedly asserted that the project would make the Ortega a much safer roadway, particularly by making the lanes wider and straighter for large, commercial trucks. Yet a local paramedic pointed out that the highest accident rates and most numerous fatalities regularly occurred on the widest and straightest highways, simply because they were used by more trucks, and conditions allowed the trucks to go faster. He wondered aloud how CalTrans could then assume that making the Ortega wider and straighter would somehow result in fewer accidents? His question was ignored.

One local resident offered what seemed like the best solution of all. He suggested that if commercial trucking were simply outlawed on the Ortega, which is within the power of CalTrans, then the trucks would have to use the freeways instead, and the accident rate on the Ortega would drop significantly, all for only the cost of putting up a few signs. His proposal got a huge round of applause. The CalTrans response was: "We'll look into that."

But CalTrans has absolutely no intention of "looking into that." They already have the funding, and have made their plans, and if they don't go ahead with the project, they lose the money, and the reason for their jobs. Time and time again, no one from CalTrans would answer the query, "Are you going ahead with this project no matter what?" Finally, when it turned into a shouting match, with 20 or 30 people yelling "Answer the question!" it was admitted that the only thing that can stop the project at this stage is an edict from the Governor. This "public forum" was basically to allow people to vent their anger, but in the end, would have no effect at all on the project.

So, we will lose our great motorcycling road, several small businesses will be forced into bankruptcy, and thousands of people will have about two hours a day added to their commute, basically for no other reason than to "protect" the CalTrans budget, and to justify some bureaucrats' jobs.

"We're from the government, and we're here to help."

—Fred Rau