Sleeping dragon lurks on freeway

But the waiting time, my brothers,
Is the hardest time of all.
—Sarah Doudney (1843-1926)

By Hillary Hauser
News-Press Staff Writer

There is a sleeping dragon that lurks in the hearts of drivers, which sometimes wakes up with a roar whenever cars are forced into a slow crawl on the freeway.

As ongoing construction projects continue indefinitely on Santa Barbara's main artery, Highway 101, a variety of dragon-hearted drivers were led the other day to growl about what it feels like to wait on the road.

The location of the interviews was the Milpas onramp that shoots south on the freeway — the one where you can drive along at a normal clip past that old bikini place which is now a roofing company, until you get to where you can see the freeway ahead.

U-turn

When there is a traffic jam on the freeway, those who think fast enough are known to pull over onto the dirt shoulder of the onramp. When the dust settles and the coast is clear, they do a big U-turn and head back to Milpas or some other road.

The U-turners of the Milpas onramp weren't in such a big rush the other day that they didn't want to talk about the impatience they feel in traffic jams, however.

"My Lord!" said Macey Mullarkey (that is her real name), visiting a cousin in Summerland for a week. "They are out there, playing with flowers, and the traffic is backed up to San Francisco!"

Freeway divider

The Caltrans workers are not playing with flowers, she was told. They are building a freeway divider to keep cars and other monsters from crossing over the line and causing those head-on collisions everyone hates.

"Yeah," said Ms. Mullarkey. "But couldn't they do it at night? Why do they do this when WE need the road?"

Joe Villa said he was on his way back to Ventura, and that for a five-mile stretch just south of Summerland, the freeway was marked with signs, but that no one was around working.

In hiding?

"Maybe they're hiding in those scrawny palm trees they're planting," he said. Anyway, I'm going to go the beach way, and get back on the freeway just past the Miramar."

When he was asked if this might take longer than inching along with everyone else, he replied in deeply philosophical tones, "I'd rather drive faster and have it take longer than wait in a big line."

There it is. Man wants to go faster, even if it takes longer. To heck with Euripides, who said, Slow But Sure Moves the Might of the Gods.

Dragon awakens

Actually, the dragon of impatience awakens inside man whenever he has to wait anywhere. Grocery store lines, crowds in the post office, a big queue at Wendy's, the lineup at the bank — the waiting time, my brothers, is the hardest time of all, so we all do U-turns, everywhere.

Maybe it's a part of a primitive urge to remain unimpeded in our progress, or to be the only ones doing what we do. "Oh, there was no one there!" is a statement you'll hear more often in happy tones than, "Oh, there were crowds!"

Maybe in the back of our minds we remember what the scientific guys say about too many rats in a cage, and in this case we've got too many cages on the road.

Pressing matters

Sometimes it's even the pressing matter of time and appointments, but the majority of Milpas onramp U-turners were on their way home to relax. They were merely reflecting man's predilection for going faster, even if it's time-consuming.

Elsewhere on the freeway, the I Hate to Wait Bunch can be seen in the cars that smash through the oleanders as they zip past a long line of waiting automobiles, half on the shoulder, half in the dirt.

It's illegal, will cost them a bundle if they get caught, and there's always a chance that a car in line will pull out without seeing an oleander-covered automobile sneaking up from the rear.

Minutes saved

And traffic experts say these illegal maneuvers save only minutes in travel time.

Many of the U-turners on the Milpas onramp expressed disgust at the larger wait — the freeway project itself.

"What are they diddling around about?" said Bernie Stinchfield of Goleta (not his real name). "You think, I can put up with it today, but then there they are, the next day, and the next day they are there, too, and the next."

Stinchfield sized up the whole thing this way: "That diamond lady is responsible for this, and the only thing she ever did right was boost the sales of rubber dolls."

Diamond lanes

He was, of course, referring to the controversial "diamond lanes" project created by former Caltrans director Adriana Gianturco (her real name).

On a number of Los Angeles freeways, fast-moving lanes (usually to the far left) were painted with big blue diamonds, just like on those kitchen-match boxes, and just before and after work hours, these lanes could only be used by cars carrying two or more passengers. The cars with single drivers had to crawl along like ants in the other lanes.

The whole thing was to encouraging car pooling, and it was strictly enforced by policemen, who wrote out tickets like mad in the beginning. But then there were increasing incidences of single drivers being caught with blow-up mannequins sitting beside them, and the next thing everyone knew, there the diamond lanes disappeared.

On the Milpas onramp, these and other Caltrans tales were told (like the big electric freeway signs which were built to tell drivers about upcoming freeway conditions, but which ended up telling them to Have a Nice Day).

Even though Caltrans got blamed for everything under the sun by the U-turners the other day, the real culprit in the matter seemed to be man's primitive aversion to waiting, period.

Everything comes if a man will only wait said Disraeli. All human error is impatience, said Kafka. Let me out of here, said the U-turners.