

Eric Phelps named a Volunteer of the Year



Once again one of the recipients of the annual Volunteer of the Year award announced by Caltrans' Adopt-a-Highway program coordinator Jeanette Green is someone connected with the Highway 68 corridor.

Last year, corridor residents Gary Nelson and Mike English shared the award, while this year it went to Eric Phelps, the owner of Corral de Tierra Realty. He is also one of the developers of a controversial shopping center he would like to see built just off Highway 68.

Phelps has been keeping the stretch of Highway 68 between the Reservation Road and Portola exits litter-free for the past decade. Once a month he dons his orange vest and helmet, grabs his litter "plucker" and a handful of garbage bags, and walks his area. Sometimes one of his employees, either Rafael or Luis Ortega, will join Phelps in the cleanup.

With two people working, the Sunday morning tidy-up session takes between 90 minutes and two hours to complete. Since they are not allowed to venture into the center median area, the two men focus their attention on the sides of the roadway.

The smaller pieces of refuse go into the trash bags while the larger items are stacked in a central place where a Caltrans crew will later pick them up along with the full bags.

Now a bit of an expert on highway litter, Phelps said that the summer months produce more roadside trash than the winter months. Thanks to the state's successful recycling program for cans and bottles, the bulk of what is collected is paper debris.

Phelps guesses that about 85 percent of what he snatches up with his picker falls into the broad category of cardboard beverage containers or other paper products.

The other 15 percent is an eclectic combination of objects from wood and auto parts to the occasional piece of furniture. What is really frustrating is finding a full garbage bag that has fallen off a vehicle and split open.

The most challenging aspect of the monthly trash collection is getting as much litter as possible out of the roadside vegetation. It's a chore and takes extra time getting into the bushes and behind the shrubs to pull out the paper.

"Overall, I think the amount of trash has gone down," Phelps said. "I don't know if that is because they are consciously trying to not litter or if they are just recycling more."

Because a portion of the highway here has noise abatement walls on both sides, it is also possible that the wind creates a wind tunnel of sorts that scours the area, blowing any light debris either east or westward. Phelps said that he has noticed there are a few areas that seem to serve as a catch basin for paper on the northern side of the road.

"I think by keeping the area clean drivers notice there's no trash and they respond by not littering as they drive along," Phelps said.

Other than the occasional squirrel, Phelps has not encountered any interesting wildlife while working the roadside. In fact, he has rarely had to call animal control to remove any animals hit by vehicles.

What is encouraging, Phelps said, is receiving recognition, in the form of an appreciative honk and wave, from drivers as they pass. "It is gratifying when this happens," he said.

Asked why he volunteered, Phelps replied that it was a way to give back to the community he has lived and worked in all his life.

A Salinas native, Phelps graduated from Salinas High in 1989 and attended Colorado State University. Along with Wendy and Mike Grim, he opened Corral de Tierra Realty in 1994.

Since he drives his "adopted" stretch of Highway 68 to work every day, Phelps did admit that he becomes a little frustrated after he has finished a Sunday cleanup to see litter alongside the road the next day. Fortunately, this doesn't happen very often.

Jeanette Green announced that other winners of this year's Central Coast Adopt-A-Highway Volunteers of the Year award were Waste Management (Highway 1) and Harvey Holm (Highway 17).