

Caltrans tries 'clean slate' on Niles Canyon Road project

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FREMONT -- Caltrans officials said they are restarting the Niles Canyon Road project because they want to make the scenic highway as safe as possible, and Monday night they offered a pair of presentations to explain how they might do it.

Area residents promptly responded with suggestions and some pointed criticism -- perhaps not surprising for a project where previous plans to widen the two-lane roadway connecting Fremont and Interstate 680 in Sunol were quashed just seven months ago.

It was the first public meeting since Caltrans abandoned its original \$80 million project in December to settle a lawsuit filed by the Alameda Creek Alliance, an environmental group that challenged the environmental review.

Traci Ruth, a Caltrans spokeswoman, started the meeting by reiterating that the agency is scrapping its previous three-phase plan and wants to move forward with a "clean slate" on a new, improved project.

"Niles Canyon still does have safety issues and they need to be addressed," Ruth said. "However, Caltrans has heard the public's concerns and we are committed to working with them."

The crowd of 200 applauded the announcement, then spent the next three hours peppering agency officials with questions, occasionally with a contentious tone.

Some speakers advised against making changes that invited more drivers. "If you want to increase safety, you should look at calming the traffic," said Fremont resident Kimberly Harbin. "Widening the road won't necessarily calm the traffic."

A team of analysts -- comprised of officials from the Federal Highway Administration, Caltrans, Alameda County Water District, California Highway Patrol, the cities of Union City and Fremont and private consultants -- delivered two presentations that detailed the roadway's safety challenges and proposals for solving them.

The presentations -- found online at <http://www.dot.ca.gov/dist4/nilescanyon> -- are subject to change, depending on public feedback and further research, Ruth said. The final reports are

expected to be completed in September or October, after the public has been given at least a month to read and respond to them, she said. Another public meeting will be scheduled in the coming weeks.

The winding eight-mile portion of State Route 84 cuts through an area beloved for its rural charms, including Alameda Creek, rare animal species, a large number of eucalyptus and sycamore trees and a popular recreational train route.

Some residents called for crafting a plan that protects as many of those strengths as possible.

"I'd like Caltrans to have a 50-year vision because if we're going to spend the money, we should have the vision now," said Jana Sokale, of Newark. "This study is very road-dependent; and we came to you with bigger thoughts, such as improving pedestrian and bicycle access."

Other residents questioned Caltrans and the accident statistics it submitted for its previous plan.

"Last time, they cooked the books," said Andrew MacRae, a Fremont resident.

A number of residents called for greater transparency in the process, and Ruth and other Caltrans officials said they agreed.

"We do know there is a lot of concern for what we had previously planned to do," the agency spokeswoman said. "But we're committed to transparency and to finding win-win solutions. We're inviting the public to come along with us in the process."