

Caltrans proposes improvements for Niles Canyon Road

by Wes Bowers
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The California Department of Transportation's latest proposal to improve safety conditions on Niles Canyon Road was met with a warmer reception earlier this month than it had been in previous attempts.

However, many Fremont, Sunol and Union City residents still believed other alternatives could be sought by the state agency.

Caltrans hosted a feedback forum at the Fremont Senior Center on Dec. 10 as nearly 100 residents from Fremont, Union City and Sunol attended. This was the agency's first proposal since it asked the Federal Highway Administration and consultants Value Management Strategies to come up with an agreeable solution for everyone.

In July, the highway administration and VMS reported that widening Niles Canyon Road was not necessary in the immediate future, but recommended several short- and medium-term solutions to improving traffic on Route 84.

Caltrans had begun its Route 84 Safety Improvement Project in 2010, until residents claimed the agency failed to prepare an environmental impact report, and there were adverse impacts to sensitive species.

The three phases of the project would have widened much of Niles Canyon Road between Fremont and Interstate 680 to provide 12-foot lanes, a 2-foot median, and up to 8-foot shoulders. Caltrans proposed cutting 600 trees along Alameda Creek and filling the floodplain with more than four miles of cement retaining walls and rip-rap.

But a lawsuit filed by the Alameda Creek Alliance and other grassroots organizations halted the project last summer. Last December, a Supreme Court judge ordered the project to stop altogether.

Since then, the transit agency and VMS came up with 16 short-term fixes for Route 84, which included placing reflective materials and signs on several underpasses and guardrails, as well as increased signage and visibility.

Twelve medium-term solutions included road realignments; relocating railroad abutments; widening roads; building roundabouts; and constructing intersection signals, among other ideas.

In addition, the two groups also suggested only implementing safety measures at certain points along the route, including the Rosewarnes Underpass, the low speed areas between bridges, the Palomares/Farwell

Underpass, both intersections at Main Street and the Pleasanton/Sunol exit, and the Alameda Creek Bridge.

Ron Kiaana, Caltrans' project manager, said at the meeting the agency would like to move forward with those short-and mid-term solutions.

He added, however, the agency wanted to get public feedback before implementing any measures on the road.

He said implementation would not occur for at least another year, after a Caltrans project-scoping period.

"We wanted to take a step back and get a second opinion to determine whether or not safety improvements were needed," he said. "Safety improvements are warranted, as collision rates are above the state average."

But those safety improvements will not be as drastic as widening the entire seven-mile stretch of Niles Canyon Road.

Improvements will most likely involve installing reflective lights at Rosewarnes Underpass, the low speed areas between bridges, the Palomares/Farwell Underpass, both intersections at Main Street and the Pleasanton/Sunol exit, and the Alameda Creek Bridge.

Minor widening in these five areas will also be done to allow for speed limit enforcement by California Highway Patrol. In addition, Caltrans will remove vegetation obstructing safety signs, and install new feedback signs, such as electronic ones that report drivers' speeds.

"We would monitor roadway safety after these measures are implemented, and only consider long-term measures if absolutely necessary," Kiaana said.

Many in attendance who spoke at the meeting were generally pleased Caltrans had avoided the seven-mile widening altogether.

"We think the FHA report provided Caltrans the chance to avoid another controversy that involved cutting down hundreds of trees," Alameda Creek Alliance President Jeff Miller said. "Hopefully this is the start of a new chapter and better process."

Yet many still did not want Caltrans to widen the road at the five locations discussed.

Virginia Cummins, a spokesperson for Save Our Hills Union City, said traffic lights, rumble strips and more signs would improve traffic more than road widening.

Bob Furlman, a spokesperson for the Sunol Citizens Advisory Commission, suggested a three-way intersection at the Main Street and Pleasanton/Sunol exit would also work rather than any widening.

However, some were still skeptical Caltrans' newest proposal was a veiled attempt to restart its previous project, which included the removal of hundreds of trees in the canyon.

One of some 20 improvements suggested included what was described as the "removal of certain fixed objects from the immediate roadway."

Andrew MacRae said that improvement sounded like cutting down trees.

"Is there any assurance you can give us that you won't be out there at midnight cutting down more trees?" he asked.

Kiaana responded that "fixed objects" did include trees, but only those within 8 feet of the roadway. Other fixed objects would include old road signs or rails.

Caltrans, Kiaana added, will most likely not start on any improvements for at least another four years.

Others felt positive about Monday night's meeting.

"The last time we were all in a room with Caltrans it was very confrontational," Niles businessman Bruce Cates said. "I'm thankful you've come back and rethought the process, and gave us a chance to provide input from the community."

Fremont City Councilwoman Sue Chan encouraged Caltrans to keep this new line of dialogue with the community open in order to produce a project that would be a win-win for everyone.

"I think we're seeing a sharp contrast in this discussion between Caltrans and the community," she said. "I want to compliment everyone here tonight. It was a very good dialogue and we have a lot of work to do."

Caltrans is scheduled to hold several stakeholder meetings on the project beginning in late January. For more information and updates on the project, visit dot.ca.gov/dist4/nilescanyon.