

Fremont residents protest Route 84 widening

by Wes Bowers
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About two dozen Tri-Cities and Sunol residents gathered on Liberty Street Monday to silently protest an ongoing plan to widen parts of state Route 84.

The Alameda Creek Alliance, Save Our Sunol, Save Niles Canyon and others were outside City of Fremont's administrative offices at 39550 Liberty St. at 8:30 a.m. Monday, shortly before a meeting between California Department of Transportation and the Federal Highway Administration. The two transit agencies held a three-hour meeting to gather input on the state's new proposal for safety procedures along Niles Canyon Road.

Grassroots groups opposing the proposal held large signs outside the administrative buildings. Save Niles Canyon member Mike Dubinsky said the two agencies were prepared to tell residents how the process for road safety works and what the plans are for Route 84.

"We're wondering why they feel the need to do this," he said. "And we want to learn what the process is and be able to comment on it."

Dubinsky said he and others who came to protest were baffled that Caltrans set up the meeting, considering the agency was hit with a lawsuit to halt operations on its Niles Canyon Road Safety Improvement project last year.

The alliance filed a lawsuit last June claiming Caltrans submitted an inadequate environmental review for the first phase of its road-widening project. The agency settled with Alameda Creek Alliance in December, and was ordered to stop work on the project.

But Caltrans announced earlier this year it will restart the environmental review and public comment process for phases one and two of its \$80-million highway widening project in Niles Canyon.

The May 7 meeting was the first of two to get local stakeholder feedback. Opponents of the project said Caltrans has previously ignored public input on the project, and claimed the meetings are pointless.

"We want Caltrans and these representatives from the federal government to know that we feel these projects are a waste of taxpayers' money, and it could be spent elsewhere," Save Niles Canyon member Michelle Powell said.

According to Caltrans, there were 436 traffic collisions between 1999 and 2008 on Niles Canyon Road, 11 of which were fatal and 226 of which resulted in injuries.

The statistics, which Caltrans said were provided by the California Highway Patrol, said 167 of those accidents involved trucks. Ten of those were commercial trucks.

Caltrans said this data warranted wider lanes on Niles Canyon Road.

But Oakland-based Whitlock & Weinberger Transportation Inc., a consulting firm hired by the city, found accident rates on Route 84 were slightly lower than the statewide average.

In addition, the firm found after Caltrans installed a centerline rumble strip along Niles Canyon Road in 2007, the number of collision each year actually decreased.

Jim Pierson, Fremont's public works director, said Caltrans requested a Federal Highway Authority safety team review of the canyon make their own set of recommendations.

He said the agency will review the current road design, look at the signage, lighting and other amenities along Niles Canyon Road, as well as traffic and accident data.

"They will then prepare a list of possible improvements that might improve the safety," Pierson said. "They will be giving this project a fresh look. In other words, they said they probably won't even look at what Caltrans was previously proposing."

He added Caltrans has developed a "value analysis" team that includes Caltrans staff and a representative from California Highway Patrol, as well as a staff member from the cities of Fremont and Union City and the County of Alameda. Pierson said there is also a former Caltrans employee on the team who is now acting as a consultant to the study.

"(The value analysis team) will review the list of suggestions from the FHWA team and analyze those in terms of costs, environmental impacts, safety benefits, etc. and I believe come up with a list of prioritized improvements for Caltrans to consider as an alternative to their prior safety project design which was strictly to widen the road throughout the canyon to get consistent 8-foot outside shoulders," he said.

The highway administration is scheduled to present its final report to the stakeholder group May 23 at 39550 Liberty St. Pierson said Caltrans noted its value analysis work will probably continue another four weeks after that date.