

Team looking at safety situation on Niles Canyon Road

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FREMONT -- A team of the Federal Highway Administration employees and California Highway Patrol officers is conducting a safety assessment of Niles Canyon Road as Caltrans takes another look at a controversial road-widening project that was shelved after a lawsuit last year.

Caltrans and the team, which includes three Federal Highway Administration employees and a CHP lieutenant, hosted a public hearing Monday morning about the assessment and the next steps for the three-phase project to widen Niles Canyon Road, a winding two-lane state highway connecting Fremont and Interstate 680 near Sunol.

As part of the lawsuit settlement, Caltrans announced in January that it would relaunch the first phase of an \$80 million highway-widening project in the canyon. The transportation agency has restarted the public comment and environmental impact reports for the first two phases of the project, which would remove hundreds of trees and build retaining walls in order to widen the road to include 8-foot shoulders, a center median and fewer sharp curves.

Environmentalists say the project would damage habitat for the steelhead trout, Alameda whipsnake and red-legged frog and remove rare sycamore forest.

The safety team will analyze accident data, observe traffic patterns and recommend possible safety improvements to Niles Canyon Road. Next, another team will meet with community members and city and county officials to examine the project's environmental impact and other issues.

Caltrans officials said they expect to reach a final decision on how to proceed with the project in two to three months.

"Basically, we're going to try to make sense of all the findings that the (safety) team comes up with," said George Hunter of Value Management Strategies, which is working on the second part of the analysis.

Mark Zabaneh, Caltrans' deputy district director for project management, said the agency is concerned with safety, not increasing the traffic through Niles Canyon. If the safety assessment doesn't show there's a problem, Caltrans could drop the project, he said.

"Why would we spend \$80 million if he comes and tells me I have no problem?" Zabaneh told assembled community members at Monday's meeting. "I know you guys are frustrated. I know the canyon's beautiful. We have no hidden agenda."

Community members opposing the project carried posters to Monday's meeting with messages such as "Save Niles Canyon," "Public Says No" and "Scenic is Worth Saving."

"We can only wipe out so many creeks and so many watersheds, because we're not just talking about a little creek that you see on the side of the road -- we're talking about the Alameda County watershed, which has a huge impact," said Shashana Chittle, of Fremont, who came to the meeting with her 2-year-old daughter, Elka Hadley.

"I just want to urge you to please do what you can for the children, for the future generations."

The state transportation agency abandoned the original project in December to settle a lawsuit filed by the Alameda Creek Alliance, which challenged the environmental review. As part of the agreement, Caltrans agreed to rescind its 2006 approval and environmental review for the project, and terminate the construction contract.

Caltrans says the widening of Niles Canyon Road will make the road safer.

But environmentalists, citizen groups and the city of Fremont opposed much of the proposed work, saying it is unnecessary, would destroy sensitive habitat and ruin the canyon's beauty by removing hundreds of trees and adding more than two miles of concrete retaining walls.

Opponents of the project say accidents decreased dramatically after Caltrans installed a centerline rumble strip to reduce crossover collisions in 2007, and that any further safety concerns can be addressed without road-widening.

"It truly is a resource as a road, and people love it," said Michelle Powell, a Niles resident and member of the Save Niles Canyon group. "People truly love to drive that road and I'd hate to see it get turned into simply an expressway. ... This is a road that's not meant to be a freeway. It's more than just getting from Livermore to Hayward quick with your coffee."