

My Word: Must save Niles Canyon from Caltrans project

By Jeff Miller
Guest Commentary

4/07/2011

IT IS time for legislators representing Alameda County to step up and stop the environmental destruction along Alameda Creek in Niles Canyon.

Caltrans has begun a damaging and unnecessary project to widen Highway 84 through Niles Canyon, under the guise of safety. This controversial project will actually make the canyon more dangerous for drivers and cyclists, waste \$76 million in public funds, degrade important trout habitat in Alameda Creek and jeopardize a decade of restoration efforts, blight a designated scenic highway, and ruin the natural beauty of Niles Canyon.

Caltrans has already destroyed more than 100 mature native trees and damaged trout habitat as part of phase one of this project. Caltrans refused to conduct a transparent and thorough environmental review and has not been forthcoming in disseminating information to the public about the project.

Despite assurances there would be no more tree cutting until another public meeting is held, Caltrans continues to destroy trees alongside the creek.

Caltrans plans further destruction this summer through filling portions of the creek channel and floodplain with concrete retaining walls and riprap boulders. Then, phase two in the middle of the canyon would take out nearly 500 more trees and damage more irreplaceable trout habitat by adding nearly two additional miles of retaining walls and armoring along the creek.

The Alameda Creek Alliance, Save Niles Canyon, Save Our Sunol, Friends of Coyote Hills, Southern Alameda County Sierra Club, East Bay Chapter of the California Native Plant Society, Tri-City Ecology Center, and Local Ecology and Agriculture Fremont are all opposing the project.

More than 170 local residents attended a hearing last month to oppose the project, with only one day's notice. After being inundated with letters against the project and being excoriated by an angry crowd at the hearing, Caltrans claimed it would hold another public meeting in the evening so that more of the community can attend and stated that no more trees would be cut before this hearing.

Yet Caltrans continues to cut trees along Alameda Creek and after a month has not yet scheduled the hearing.

Despite severe inadequacies in the environmental review process and failure to adequately notify or inform the public of the project, Caltrans has yet to answer the public comments and questions posed to it and refuses to put the project on hold.

There are major discrepancies between state safety data and Caltrans' rationale for the project. Questions remain about the purported safety benefits, severe environmental impacts, flagrant waste of \$75.9 million in public funds and potential economic and aesthetic impacts on the communities of Niles and Sunol. These issues were not evaluated in the environmental review.

Where are our elected officials? We have asked State Sen. Ellen Corbett and Congressman Pete Stark to intervene. Hundreds of their constituents have requested legislative support in convincing Caltrans to put this project on hold.

The community is waiting for assistance to force Caltrans to stop the phase one project immediately until the areas of controversy are resolved, and to reopen the environmental review and public comment period for phase two.

This project stinks and it is time for our elected officials to step up and represent the public interest.

Jeff Miller is the founder of the Alameda Creek Alliance and has been its director since 1997, when the nonprofit began working to protect and restore Alameda Creek.