

Caltrans tweaks plans for Niles Canyon roadway improvements

by Wes Bowers
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In an attempt to quell the outburst from Fremont and Sunol residents over its state Route 84 improvement project, the California Department of Transportation held a handful of open houses last week to present revamped plans. Many members of the public are still not satisfied.

Caltrans held two open houses in Sunol July 26 and in Union City July 28. A third and final open house was held at Fremont Main Library Tuesday night to present updated plans for the second phase of the agency's Niles Canyon Road Safety Improvement project, which has seen a groundswell of opposition from Fremont and Sunol residents as well as environmental groups such as the Alameda Creek Alliance and Save Niles Canyon.

Ron Kiaaina, a Caltrans project manager, said the state agency received more than 200 letters of opposition about the project and as a result the agency decided to address those concerns.

Earlier this year, opponents were angered when they learned Caltrans cut down about 100 trees in the area and planned to cut about 500 more. Some of those trees included a eucalyptus grove on the western end of the 4.4-mile project.

Kiaaina said those 25 eucalyptus could be potentially saved. Instead of cutting them down, Caltrans proposed widening the highway by about 16 feet to the west side of the roadway.

Caltrans' original plan was to widen the road by 4 feet on each side. Kiaaina said while the agency offered this option to the public for feedback Caltrans would prefer removing the trees altogether.

"Eucalyptus trees are non-native to the area," he said. "We conducted an evaluation of the trees and found they weren't historically important and offer no significant resource."

But residents disagreed. They argued the trees did have historical significance, as they are featured prominently in several films starring Charlie Chaplin and Broncho Billy Anderson.

Kiaaina said Caltrans also plans to remove seven of 12 retaining walls proposed near the Alameda Creek Bridge after residents voiced concern about potential graffiti problems.

Instead of retaining walls, Caltrans will cut slightly into the canyon wall as much as 10 feet high and cover the new formation with a mesh debris containment drapery.

However, five retaining walls will still be installed between the Niles Canyon Railway Maintenance Yard and Sunol, he said. But those walls will be treated with a rock aesthetic to make them look natural as well as to facilitate easier graffiti removal, Kiaaina added.

Lastly, Kiaaina said Caltrans will minimize tree removal along about a half mile of Paloma Way near Interstate 680.

Caltrans originally planned to remove all the trees on the north side of Route 84, but will now install a metal-beam guardrail to protect them from vehicle collisions.

"These are the types of things we looked at," Kiaaina said. "We feel with these changes, we have cost savings and the ability to protect and reduce the amount of impacts that raised concern."

Caltrans' project is split into three stages, costing an estimated \$80 million. The first two involve widening the majority of Niles Canyon Road between Fremont Boulevard and Interstate 680 to provide 12-foot lanes, a 2-foot median and 2-foot to 8-foot shoulders.

The first phase was scheduled to start this spring and the second phase by fall 2012. The third phase is expected to get underway in summer 2013, and will replace the Alameda Creek Bridge.

The project is aimed at improving highway and bicycle safety. Caltrans said there were 436 vehicle collisions along the roadway between 199 and 2008.

Of those, 11 were fatal and 236 involved injuries.

The statistics, which Caltrans said was provided by the California Highway Patrol, said 167 of those accidents involved trucks. Ten of those were commercial trucks, according to data, equating to 6 percent.

Just 1 percent, or about four of those 436 accidents, involved motorcycles or pedestrians, according to Caltrans.

Residents Tuesday night questioned why the transit agency was going to all this trouble for less than 500 accidents on the roadway over the duration of 10 years.

Many suggested Caltrans simply lower the speed limit there or have the California Highway Patrol enforce the current one, which is 45 mph.

However, Caltrans officials said in order to enforce the current speed limit, the roadway must be widened to accommodate California Highway Patrol's ability to pull traffic violators over.

In addition, Kiaaina said Caltrans does not have the ability or the authority to adjust speed limits.

"The limit is set by a survey," he said. "And by law, that limit is based on an 85th percentile. The survey conducted for 84 showed the average speed was about 47 miles an hour. We can't just lower the speed limit."

Fremont resident Marilyn Webb has attended several meetings held by both Caltrans and the public about the widening project.

She said while the agency claims to be addressing safety issues along Route 84, she said she doesn't think the proposed improvements will make anything better in Niles Canyon.

"We have an historic area in Fremont and don't want it ruined and don't want it gone," she said. "But with all these options that seems to be the result."

Caltrans will accept public comment on its project until 5 p.m. today. To submit comments or find out more information on the project, visit dot.ca.gov/dist4/nilescanyon.