

At Least 80 Trees Felled in Niles Canyon's 1st Phase

By Ron McNicoll

The good news for angry residents in Sunol and Fremont who want to save hundreds of trees along scenic Niles Canyon Road from the CalTrans ax is that the highway department has stopped cutting the trees.

Residents who attended a meeting March 9 in Fremont were happy to hear that from a CalTrans official. A minute later, they let out a groan of shock and disappointment when they heard that the cutting was halted because all the trees that needed to be cut in phase 1 have been cut. The job was finished on March 4.

The total toll on the trees was between 80 and 100, which upset many in the audience. A total of 439 trees could be leveled by the end of the work for the third and final phase of the project.

Jeff Miller, director of the Alameda Creek Alliance, seemed to sum up the group's feeling when he got applause by telling three major Cal Trans officials, "You slipped this one past us, but you won't on phase 2."

The official phase 2 public hearing was conducted last fall. CalTrans is responding to comments. However, the agency is trying to schedule a meeting for the public to comment further, working through Sen. Ellen Corbett's office. She and Assemblymember Bob Wieckowski arranged last week's meeting.

Ron Kiiiana, manager of the project for CalTrans, told the Independent that he expects the comments at the future meeting to resemble those from last week's meeting, and from the phase 2 EIR meeting last fall.

Besides wanting to save trees and the beauty they provide motorists, the critics said that widening the road will speed up traffic. Although CalTrans said the posted limit won't rise about the current 45 mph, residents said that some drivers will behave otherwise, and pose more danger than exists now. Enforcement is up to the CHP, but it may be possible to coordinate some of their work with CalTrans, said Kiiiana.

CalTrans officials said at the meeting last week that the widening is all about safety. Widening the shoulders to 8 to 10 feet and making the center rumble strip 2 feet wide, plus having each of the two traffic lanes at 12 feet will be a big help in reducing accidents. It will give motorists more room to swerve to avoid accidents.

Some 38 percent of the accidents involve trucks, which led some in the audience to call for a truck ban. However, any assumption that most of the truck accidents are big rigs is false, said Kiiiana. Some 80 percent of the

trucks involved in the crashes are pickup trucks or trucks the size of a UPS truck. Nine percent were tractors with one trailer and 2 percent were tractors with two trailers. The Fremont City Council has discussed possible enacting a ban on trucks on the road.