



Protestors were on hand to picket crews cutting down trees along Niles Canyon Road.

Sunol Residents Protest Doom For 400 Niles Canyon Trees

By Ron McNicoll

Sunol residents and their counterparts in Fremont at the other end of Niles Canyon Road have been picketing road crews

that are cutting down trees in the canyon.

Eventually, more than 400 trees are supposed to meet the ax after all three phases of a Niles

Canyon Road widening are complete.

Picketers from both ends of Niles Canyon — Sunol and the (See NILES, page 9)

Niles district of Fremont — showed up Saturday night with placards objecting to the tree cutting.

Sunol resident Bob Foster, a former school board member there, was one of the half-dozen to turn out.

He said the group was given a CHP escort to the site, because the workers called police to complain after Foster, first on the scene, told them other protesters would arrive. However, the scene was peaceful. The demonstrators took pictures of their protest, then left.

The road is being closed down to one lane of traffic switching back and forth in each direction at a flag-waver's discretion from 9 p.m. to 5 a.m. on weekdays and 6 a.m. on Sunday mornings.

The road is state Highway 84, so CalTrans has jurisdiction. It has hired the contractors who are felling the trees.

Residents and their allies, which include the Alameda Creek

Alliance and the Fremont City Council, hope to stop the tree removal.

The Creek Alliance is considering filing for a court restraining order against CalTrans to halt the work, said spokesman Jeff Miller. He contends that CalTrans is piecemealing the project, which he said would be a violation of the EIR process.

CalTrans did not respond with any comment about the project in time for The Independent's deadline.

The Fremont City Council has been discussing the feasibility of banning trucks on the road, which would make it safer without having to do improvements that would remove trees, said Kimberly Harbin, a Fremont resident who lives near the mouth of Niles Canyon.

CalTrans statistics in the draft EIR show that only 2.6 percent of the traffic on the road is comprised of trucks. However, those vehicles account for 38 percent

of the accidents. Eliminate truck traffic, and the road is automatically safer, is the logic behind the Fremont council's discussion.

Fremont transportation engineer Kunle Odumade told the Independent that his city has the power to ban the truck traffic. However, it would be a long process, involving talks with the state and the trucking industry. "We'll give it a push," he said.

The city has no power to halt the tree-cutting, because it is a state route, said Odumade.

Even as it is now, the accident rate is only about average for rural roads. Eliminating truck traffic would improve it to lower than average, said Harbin.

Foster said that the improvements to the road, including widening the shoulders, and making some curves more gradual, will only encourage more speeding through the canyon.

Foster stated that when he asked questions of CalTrans early in the process of the EIR

circulation, "It showed many of us that this was going to be a visual nightmare. All of the traffic calming devices that exist in canyon now — trees, rocks, and shrubbery — are not only a delight to the eye, but calm people down, and they drive slowly. All will disappear."

Making only small upgrades to the current road, and saving the trees would also save the state much of the \$80 million it will spend on the project, said Foster.

One backer of the traffic improvements has been the East Bay Bicycle Coalition. Its web page talks about how much safer the road will be for cyclists, especially when the shoulders, now at 2 feet to 6 feet wide, where they do exist, will be much broader, and marked off with rubber pavement dots.

Foster said that if bike safety is a concern, there are much cheaper, tree-sparing ways to accomplish it.