

Niles Canyon Road widening project on hold

Carolyn Jones, Chronicle Staff Writer

Wednesday, December 14, 2011

Niles Canyon Road got a reprieve from the bulldozers Tuesday, at least for the time being.

Caltrans agreed to stop plans to widen the scenic, 8-mile route between Fremont and Sunol due to environmental concerns, according to a legal settlement reached with the Alameda Creek Alliance.

"We got to put a lump of coal in Caltrans' stocking," said Jeff Miller, head of the Alameda Creek Alliance. "I think it's clear Caltrans screwed this up on every level."

Miller's group sued Caltrans in June to stop the \$80 million project, which called for widening the shoulders and adding retaining walls and a median to Highway 84, a twisty route through the East Bay foothills that Caltrans called one of the most dangerous in the region.

The improvements would have made the road safer by giving motorists more room to safely pull over or make turns, said Caltrans spokesman Bob Haus. From 1998 to 2008, Niles Canyon Road was the scene of 436 collisions, resulting in 13 deaths and 342 people injured.

The project would have been devastating for the sensitive habitat in Niles Canyon, though, Miller said. The canyon and creek are home to the endangered Alameda whipsnake and California red-legged frog, along with steelhead and dozens of other species.

Caltrans has already removed about 100 sycamores, willows and other trees in the canyon in preparation for the widening project. The agency will have to plant replacements in the canyon.

Caltrans had also started repaving the road before Alameda County Superior Court Judge Frank Roesch issued a restraining order in June. Caltrans will now rip up the new pavement and replace the rumble strips it had removed, Haus said.

The settlement stops the first phase of the project, the portion of the road closest to Fremont. The next two phases are still under review.

Caltrans will probably start over with the first phase, putting forth an environmental impact report and essentially starting the process from scratch, Haus said.

"Caltrans' No. 1 priority is the safety of the motoring public," he said. "We're halting construction on Highway 84 as we continue to look for ways to address safety."

Hundreds of residents of Sunol and Fremont had opposed the project, saying it would encourage motorists to drive faster through the canyon and mar the scenic beauty of the area.

"This settlement is the best thing we could have hoped for," said Dorothy Bradley, 66, of Fremont. "Let's face it - we have bars at both ends of the canyon. Making it easier for people to drive fast was not a good idea."

Instead of widening the road, Caltrans should add stop signs and ask the California Highway Patrol to increase enforcement of speed laws, she said.

"I'm very happy they now have to do an EIR," she said. "At least now they can go back and do this properly."