

Niles Canyon Road widening project battle brews

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Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle

Caltrans has already removed about 80 trees along Niles Canyon Road near the Union City border.

Niles hasn't seen this much excitement since Charlie Chaplin decamped there in 1915.

Environmentalists and residents of the historic Fremont district packed a public hearing Wednesday, haranguing Caltrans officials over plans to widen Niles Canyon Road, chopping down 500 trees in the process.

"Do we want this? Do we need this? I think the answer from everyone here is no," said Sunol resident Bob Frillman, 62. "But Caltrans has never asked us: 'Do you want us to do this?' "

Citing safety concerns, Caltrans plans to widen the scenic, winding road by 20 feet in some areas, adding shoulders and a median. The road - which connects Niles, once a bustling moviemaking hub, to Sunol and Interstate 680 - would remain two lanes.

The first phase of the project is already under way. Caltrans has removed about 80 sycamores, oaks, alders and other trees alongside the stretch of the road near the Union City border. But the next two phases have yet to be approved, and residents and environmentalists hope to derail them.

"We strongly advise (Caltrans) to stop wasting public funds on this, because we are going to stop it," said Jeff Miller, head of the Alameda Creek Alliance, saying his group would file suit if necessary.

Removing the trees has a broad impact on the environment, Miller said. The trees provide food, shelter and shade for wildlife, as well as control erosion along the creek bed.

"We spent a decade and a half trying to get steelhead back in this creek," Miller said. "This would be devastating."

Caltrans embarked on the project almost a decade ago, hoping to curb the high number of accidents along the road. From 1998 to 2008, Niles Canyon Road saw 436 collisions, resulting in 13 deaths and 342 people injured.

California Highway Patrol officers have complained that because the road lacks shoulders in many areas, it's unsafe for them to pull over motorists.

Caltrans' plans call for retaining walls, replacing Alameda Creek Bridge and adding 8- to 10-foot shoulders on both sides of the road. For every tree that's removed, Caltrans said it will plant three to five to replace them, mostly in the Alameda Creek watershed.

"We are stewards of the environment," said Caltrans District 4 Director Bijan Sartipi. "Everything we do, we follow a fair and thorough environmental process."

The second two phases of the project are still undergoing environmental review. The earliest Caltrans can approve its environmental impact reports and proceed would be this fall, with the entire project finished in spring 2014.

Niles residents said that widening the road would only increase accidents on Niles Canyon Road, not decrease them.

"I really think the safety argument is just bogus," said Dorothy Bradley, 65, of Niles. "Most of those accidents are due to drunk drivers, and widening the road won't change that. If anything, people will go even faster."

Wednesday's hearing was hosted by Assemblyman Bob Wieckowski, D-Fremont; State Sen. Ellen Corbett, D-San Leandro; and Rep. Pete Stark, D-Fremont, whose offices have been inundated with constituent complaints on the topic.

The meeting attracted a standing-room-only crowd of about 80 people, who were unanimously opposed to the project.

"Niles Canyon is as pretty a place as I've ever seen," said Sunol resident Dan Reiser, a former park ranger in the area. "These guys do not have a right to ruin it."