

Caltrans Grilled Over Plans to Widen Scenic Highway in Niles Canyon

A packed audience Thursday called on Caltrans to suspend its plans during a public hearing sponsored by Senator Ellen Corbett and Assemblymember Bob Wieckowski.

By [Jennifer Courtney](#)

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In response to a flurry of opposition against its plans to widen portions of State Route 84 through Niles Canyon, [Caltrans](#) has announced it will reopen the commenting period for phase two of the project.

The news came during an April 14 public hearing between Caltrans officials and dozens of residents who came to ask questions and express their disapproval, many with pleas that the plan immediately be put on hold.

It was the second meeting of its kind sponsored by State Sen. Ellen Corbett, D-San Leandro, and Assemblymember Bob Wieckowski, D-Fremont, whose offices have been inundated with constituent complaints on the issue.

The first two phases of the Caltrans project would remove more than 500 trees and build about two miles of retaining walls along Niles Canyon Road in order to widen road shoulders, add a center median and soften sharp curves. Shoulder rumble strips would also be installed.

Phase one includes curve realignment and widening between the Rosewarnes Underpass and Farwell Underpass. The road will also be lowered one foot under Rosewarnes to bring it into compliance with height restriction standards for overpasses.

Tree removals for the project began in late February, and actual construction is planned to begin later this spring with an ending date of December 2013.

The second phase of construction, scheduled to take place from 2013 through 2016, would widen shoulders from just east of Alameda Creek Bridge to Interstate 680.

The third component, scheduled to begin in 2014, would replace Alameda Creek Bridge and

include the removal of about 130 additional trees.

Caltrans, which has performed similar adjustments on other state highways, says the \$75.9 million project is needed to improve safety, citing above-average numbers of fatal collisions on the highway. The agency says that between 1999 and 2008, there were 436 traffic collisions that resulted in 11 fatalities and 226 injuries along Niles Canyon Road.

Widening the shoulder would allow law enforcement to safely patrol and pull over vehicles, increase visibility and provide more space for errant vehicles to correct course, according to officials.

But opponents say filling in portions of the creek channel with cement retaining walls will negatively impact efforts to restore steelhead trout in Alameda Creek. They also say the retaining walls, though built using a natural-looking architectural finish, will reduce the road's scenic beauty, as will the decreased number of trees.

Environmental groups that oppose the project include the [Alameda Creek Alliance](#), [East Bay Chapter of the California Native Plant Society](#), [Southern Alameda County Sierra Club](#), [Local Ecology and Agriculture Fremont](#), [Tri-City Ecology Center](#), [Save Niles Canyon](#), [Save Our Sunol](#) and [Friends of Coyote Hills](#).

The Niles Canyon Railway, which runs near the road, has also come out against the project.

At Thursday's meeting, Alameda Creek Alliance founder Jeff Miller said his group is working to shut down phase 1 construction, even though preparation work has already begun.

He said the project would cause significant damage to trout habitat and Caltrans should have completed a thorough environmental impact report (EIR) instead of a less stringent negative declaration. An environmental review is required under the guidelines of CEQA, the California Environmental Quality Act.

Caltrans has prepared a draft EIR for phase two of the plan.

Miller also said after meeting with Caltrans in 2005 to review negative impacts the first phase would have on the creek, he never received notice that a final project had been approved.

"The review and approval process was entirely illegitimate," he said. "It's certainly not good public policy and its certainly not transparent."

"If our elected officials don't stop you on phase one, we will stop you," Miller said to thunderous applause.

Many in attendance said the reason they are protesting the project now is because they did not hear about it until recently, believing Caltrans did not adequately advertise the first phase of the project when they began planning in 2005.

Officials at the meeting said they took out two local newspaper ads and the only respondent to request a public meeting was Miller, so they met with him directly. As a result of those discussions, Caltrans said it modified its design to include building a bridge over Stonybrook Creek instead of a culvert.

Caltrans also countered accusations of not working with the community by saying it has minimized the number of trees scheduled for removal and is "considering" replacing some of the retaining walls with a rock anchoring system.

The system would involve placing wire mesh over the slope of the canyon wall once it is scaled back, for protection from falling rocks; the mesh would be concealed over time by new vegetation growth.

Aside from aesthetic and environmental issues, opponents also question the validity of Caltrans' collision data given that it allegedly doesn't correspond with publicly-available data from the California Highway Patrol (Caltrans uses its own in-house system to record traffic accidents) and also whether the project would actually improve safety, since the changes could cause drivers to increase vehicle speed.

Roland Au-Xeung, chief of traffic operations, said because the actual lane widths will remain the same, he does not believe that drivers will go faster.

But in a memorandum Caltrans handed out to participants at the meeting, officials admitted that "the speed of motorists may increase slightly with increased driver comfort," and that in response Caltrans was contemplating installing speed feedback posts and flashing warning signs in addition to the rumble strips.

Fremont officials want Caltrans to ban trucks on Niles Canyon Road instead of widening the shoulder to improve safety.

But Caltrans District 4 Director Bijan Sartipi said such a measure wouldn't have a major safety impact because 80 percent of the truck-related accidents are caused by pickups, which can't be banned. "That doesn't address the problem we have identified," he said.

Fremont Councilmember Bill Harrison attended the meeting and said the city has "grave concerns" about the project and banning large-scale trucks would help. "We know it's not a solution, but it's a place to start. We think it's a great place to start."

Union City officials, which also met with Caltrans regarding the project last October, have not come out publicly in opposition to it.

Caltrans must go through the State Clearinghouse, which coordinates review of environmental documents pursuant to CEQA, to request an additional commenting period so has not yet announced when the 45-day timeframe will begin.