

Coalition Agrees with Most Federal Recommendations on Niles Canyon Rd.

January 11, 2013

A coalition of 12 environmental and residential groups has sent a letter to Caltrans about what they would support and what is unacceptable in a proposed traffic safety plan for Niles Canyon Road.

The 10-page letter, dated Jan. 1, is one more step in the ongoing conflict and dialogue between Caltrans and concerned Niles Canyon area residents who live in Sunol and Fremont.

Most of the organizations are from Fremont, which has a higher population than Sunol. The Sunol Citizens Advisory Committee, Save Our Sunol, and the Alameda Creek Alliance (ACA), which has spearheaded the drive for changes, are also involved.

The ACA is concerned that the initial Niles Canyon plan would pollute the creek, with detrimental results for fish habitat. Residents don't want the roadway changed because what now is a scenic drive would become a road with speeders. Many trees would be lost.

The controversy began in 2011 when Caltrans cut down 99 trees along the road. Motorists who use the canyon were shocked by the tree-felling, and picketed at safe places in the roadway in protest.

They were also critical of a lack of public notice about the three-segment plan to alter the roadway, and remove as many as 600 trees.

State representatives arranged public meetings with Caltrans officials, which drew several hundred attendees. Caltrans agreed eventually to start from scratch with a new plan.

At the invitation of Caltrans, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) became involved as a consultant, and wrote reports in May and August 2012.

The citizens groups have studied the reports, and say in their letter that they like most of what they read, because it focuses on traffic-calming measures that Caltrans could undertake, instead of alterations to the road, scenery and environmental habitat.

MOST SHORT-TERM SOLUTIONS SATISFY

The FHWA came up with 15 short-term suggestions and 12 mid-term ideas. It also had some long-term ideas. However, the FHWA said that the short-term and medium-term ideas should be monitored first, to see how well they succeed, says the letter, which does not name the long-term ideas.

The FHWA also recommends a 5-to-10-year period for monitoring. Caltrans has planned to conduct three years of monitoring.

The ACA likes all but two of the short-term proposals. One is a recommendations to install steel mesh to catch falling rocks. However, the letter points out that steel mesh fences would be a blight along the scenic corridor road. Instead, cement or rock retaining walls could do the job.

The letter also objects to a suggestion to relocate "fixed objects" immediately adjacent to the roadway. That's fine, if they were manufactured objects, such as signpoles or guard rails. But Caltrans should not interpret that to mean trees and other vegetation, unless the agency can show a case-by-case need for such removal.

Also in regard to trees, the letter notes that Caltrans said at a Dec. 2010 public meeting that it would move forward quickly in early 2013 with five of the short-term measures that "it considers routine maintenance, and do not require environmental review or permitting.

Four of those measures are not controversial, but one about "trimming" trees and vegetation within 8 feet of the white-line road edges leaves the letter-signers uneasy. They want Caltrans to define and identify any trees that would be cut down or "extensively limbed." Larger trees and heritage trees should be mapped to show where they would be removed.

SUNOL COULD GET A ROUNDABOUT

The FHWA suggests 12 mid-term measures to improve safety at six locations. All of them are in Niles Canyon, except for the Highway 84/Sunol Road intersection.

A four-way stop controls traffic at the intersection. FHWA recommends converting the intersection into a roundabout, in order to reduce the length of commute-hour long lines eastbound, and therefore decrease the danger of rear-end collisions.

Another suggestion from FHWA is to install a traffic light with proper turn lanes at the Highway 85/Sunol Road intersection. However, FHWA says that alternative may actually increase collisions and overall traffic delay.

The organizations want more information about the alternatives. Caltrans has scheduled a meeting for 7 p.m. Jan. 23 in the Sunol Glen School cafeteria to hear opinions about a roundabout, traffic light, or some other solution.

In its letter, the organizations indicated they liked some of the mid-term proposals. There was a list of specific criticisms from the organizations for the canyon area at such places as the Alameda Creek Bridge, the Rosewanes Bridge, and Palomares Road. The mid-term period would be from three to five years, said Jeff Miller, director of the ACA.