

## A Dozen Community Groups Outline Proposal to Caltrans for Niles Canyon Road Safety Project

*Safety Measures, Many Suggested by Federal Highway Administration, Would Preserve Alameda Creek and Scenic Values of Niles Canyon*

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*Fremont, CA* – Twelve local conservation and community organizations sent a [letter](#) to Caltrans this week proposing safety solutions for Niles Canyon Road that do not involve needless destruction of the environmental and scenic values of Alameda Creek or Niles Canyon. The proposals are based on a recent [report](#) by the Federal Highway Administration regarding road safety in the canyon. The organizations are urging Caltrans to adopt measures supported by the communities of Niles and Sunol and local conservation groups, warning against projects with unacceptable environmental and economic impacts, and requesting further evaluation of some safety concepts identified by the FHA.

“The Federal Highway Administration and the community are recommending highway safety solutions at identified problem areas in Niles Canyon that are effective, can be done without road widening, and have minimal environmental impact,” said Jeff Miller, director of the Alameda Creek Alliance. “This is a chance for Caltrans to overcome and avoid the past problems with their highway widening proposal, and proceed with a reasonable safety project with community input, transparency and adequate environmental review.”

The groups are Alameda Creek Alliance, East Bay Chapter of the California Native Plant Society, Citizens Committee to Complete the Refuge, Friends of Coyote Hills Committee, Local Ecology and Agriculture Fremont, Mission Peak Fly Anglers, Save Niles Canyon, Save Our Hills, Save Our Sunol, Southern Alameda County Group of Sierra Club, Sunol Citizens Advisory Committee and Tri-City Ecology Center.

### **Community Supported Safety Measures**

The coalition supports significant safety improvements at two locations in the canyon identified as priority safety concerns by the FHA - the narrow Rosewarnes undercrossing near the bottom of the canyon and the Palomares Road intersection. At Rosewarnes, the coalition supports the concept and requests evaluation of constructing a tunnel under the railroad tracks into the upland slope, moving the roadway away from Alameda Creek into the hillside west of the existing road. A proposed solution at the Palomares intersection is realigning the lower end of Palomares Road so it intersects Niles Canyon Road further to the east, dramatically improving the intersection geometry and sight distance, and allowing room for a pocket turn lane for eastbound traffic from Niles Canyon onto Palomares and a standard shoulder along the westbound lane. The coalition requests that an undersized culvert at this location which routes Stonybrook Creek under Niles Canyon Road be replaced with a free-span bridge. The coalition also supports removing a curb and adding a safety barrier to a bridge overhead in the middle of the canyon.

The coalition opposes measures that would increase vehicle speeds through the canyon, such as proposals to increase the design speed of the Alameda Creek Bridge in the middle of the canyon, change curve geometry at the low-speed curve near ‘The Spot’, or cut down roadside trees. Aside from the fact that the FHA found these measures would have little safety benefit, some of Caltrans’ proposed measures suggest their intent is to enable motorists to drive at higher speeds rather than make the road safer to travel at currently posted speed limits. The coalition proposes use of traffic ‘calming’ measures (slowing vehicle speeds down in dangerous areas) that have shown to be effective, such as flashing and traffic lights, rumble strips, and radar feedback signs. Passive speed control measures such as painting optical bars on the edges of the roadway can alter driver perceptions of road safety, for example, the speed at which they negotiate a curve, inducing drivers to reduce their speed.

The coalition requests more information about proposals to add a traffic signal or roundabout in the town of Sunol at the intersections of Main Street and Pleasanton-Sunol Road with Hwy 84, to reduce vehicle backups during commute hours. Questions remain about the effectiveness and impacts of these potential solutions, including possible increase in collisions, additional traffic delays, and limiting pedestrian road crossing. The coalition suggests Caltrans investigate a temporal closure of the eastbound Highway 84 exit into Sunol during commute hours, to prevent commute traffic from cutting through the town, or leaving existing conditions in this area while adding a 3-way stop sign at Main Street to allow local traffic to exit.

The coalition endorses 13 safety measures proposed by the FHA which can be immediately and inexpensively implemented within the existing roadway, with no environmental impact. These include: improved 'positive guidance' (providing drivers information about roadway design and hazards); removing, protecting or better identifying roadside hazards; minor intersection improvements; upgrading roadway barriers, guardrails and pavement markings; lighting; flashing beacons; and speed feedback signs.

The coalition supports widening and paving some road shoulders through the canyon to accommodate law enforcement and pullovers for speeding, in areas where this can be done without removal of trees or additional grading. The coalition proposes a working group with Caltrans, CHP, County Sheriffs, and community organizations to identify potential enforcement locations, evaluate turnout improvement options, assess potential impacts, and prioritize locations.

The coalition suggests monitoring traffic volumes, traffic patterns, motorist behavior, responses to safety improvements, crashes and fatalities for 5-10 years to determine the effectiveness of safety solutions that are implemented, before any discussions are initiated about the potential need for long-term safety solutions in Niles Canyon.

## **Background**

Caltrans initially proposed a three-phase highway safety project that involved widening much of Niles Canyon Road between Fremont and Interstate 680, and would have required cutting 600 trees along Alameda Creek and filling the creek and floodplain with four miles of cement retaining walls and rip-rap to accommodate unnecessarily wide roadway shoulders. This would damage habitat for steelhead trout, as well as endangered whipsnakes and red-legged frogs, and remove rare sycamore forest along the creek. Caltrans did not focus on localized problem areas or evaluate solutions within the existing roadway.

Caltrans internally approved phase one of the project in 2006 without alerting the public, and claimed no significant environmental impacts rather than publishing a required Environmental Impact Report. Caltrans cut nearly 100 trees in the canyon in spring of 2011. After large public protests, the Alameda Creek Alliance filed suit challenging the inadequate environmental review. A court order in June 2011 halted construction and a settlement agreement in December 2011 forced Caltrans to abandon the project. An Alameda Superior Court judge [excoriated](#) the agency's clandestine project approval and obstruction of the public process.

In 2012 the Federal Highway Administration conducted a [Road Safety Assessment](#) for Highway 84 in Niles Canyon, finding that Caltrans' proposed highway widening is not warranted by the safety data. A FHA team of safety experts evaluated accident data in Niles Canyon since 2007, when a center-line rumble strip was installed that dramatically reduced collisions. The FHA looked at traffic patterns and motorist behaviors to determine whether and where safety improvements are needed. Caltrans has since promised a "clean slate" on the Niles Canyon highway safety projects, with consideration of FHA recommendations and public and stakeholder input before proposing new revised projects or beginning a new environmental review process.