



Groups Blast Caltrans Construction Plans in Niles Canyon

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Niles, CA – Local groups are opposing Caltrans' proposal for the Alameda Creek Bridge Replacement Project in Niles Canyon, exposing it as an overbuilt highway widening project that would increase driving speeds through the canyon and could actually reduce safety for motorists and bicyclists, while cutting down 300-400 native trees and damaging wildlife habitat along Alameda Creek. The Alameda Creek Alliance, East Bay Chapter of the California Native Plant Society, Citizens Committee to Complete the Refuge, Save Niles Canyon, Southern Alameda County Group of the Sierra Club, and Bay Area Transportation Working Group, as well as experts on special-status wildlife species, hydrology and fisheries, and traffic safety submitted more than 50 pages of critical [comments](#) last week on the draft [Environmental Impact Report](#) for the project.

"This Caltrans project is anything but a simple bridge replacement – it involves widening up to half a mile of Niles Canyon Road, removing hundreds of native trees and excavating along thousands of feet of the canyon, adding large retaining walls," said Jeff Miller, director of the Alameda Creek Alliance. "Caltrans' overbuilt approach is simply not needed to make the bridge segment safer."

Caltrans claims the project to replace the 87-year old Alameda Creek Bridge and add modern safety railings and road shoulders on the bridge is needed for bicyclist and motorist safety. Caltrans proposes engineering the new bridge and its roadway approaches to increase motorist speeds from 35 to 45 mph, while widening the entire roadway through the half-mile project reach to 42 feet, with shoulders. The project would require realigning 1,400 feet of roadway for the western approach and from 300 to 1,190 feet for the eastern approach. Construction would damage significant areas of the canyon with hundreds to thousands of feet of cut-and-fill and large concrete retaining walls, both above the roadway and adjacent to Alameda Creek. It would also require cutting from 284 to 414 native trees and encroaching on habitat for threatened Alameda whipsnakes, steelhead trout and red-legged frogs.

"Caltrans promised a 'clean slate' on the Niles Canyon highway safety projects with consideration of public input but this project is more of the same – trying to turn Niles Canyon road into a freeway one segment at a time," said Miller. "Caltrans should look at alternatives that would replace the bridge at the current speed of 35 mph, which would scale back the need for tree cutting and other severe environmental impacts."

Background

Caltrans claims the agency is required to increase the design speed of the bridge and its approaches to the posted speed limit of 45 mph. Yet many locations throughout the canyon are posted for 30-35 mph because of tight turns in the narrow canyon. The Federal Highway Administration and Caltrans' own Highway Design Manual allow a lower than "standard" design speed, based on environmental, safety and other considerations.

The four "alternatives" analyzed by Caltrans in the Environmental Impact Report for the bridge replacement project all increase the design speed, contain the same increases in the turn radius for the bridge

approaches, and only differ in how much cut-and-fill and retaining walls would be constructed on the east and west approaches to the bridge. All of Caltrans' "alternatives" would have severe impacts on riparian trees, endangered species habitat, and the hydrology and habitat value of Alameda Creek. Caltrans did not evaluate whether a 2007 project that installed centerline rumble strips through Niles Canyon has reduced vehicle collisions in the project area.

Caltrans acknowledges that it has not even begun mitigation for its abandoned highway widening project in lower Niles Canyon in 2011, when the agency cut 150 native trees along Alameda Creek. Caltrans has several other planned safety projects in the Niles Canyon corridor that will cumulatively cut or impact a total of 550 to 650 trees. Caltrans has no timeline for mitigation for tree-cutting impacts from the bridge replacement project and no details about where mitigation tree planting will occur. Caltrans has acknowledged that it cannot find suitable nearby mitigation sites that are acceptable to regulatory agencies, nor can it adequately mitigate for cutting large, mature trees and the loss of the habitat values they provide for native wildlife.

The proposed bridge replacement project does contain some environmentally beneficial elements, including removal of a concrete weir in Alameda Creek which currently serves as a barrier to fish passage, removal of the existing bridge's in-stream piers, and removal of invasive plants.

A dozen community groups have proposed safety solutions for Niles Canyon Road that do not involve needless destruction of the environmental and scenic values of Alameda Creek or Niles Canyon, and opposed Caltrans' plans to increase the design speed of the Alameda Creek Bridge and other road segments.

Caltrans initially proposed a three-phase highway safety project that involved widening much of Niles Canyon Road between Fremont and Interstate 680, which would damage habitat for steelhead trout and other endangered species, and remove rare sycamore forest along the creek. Caltrans internally approved phase one of the project in 2006 without alerting the public. 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. In 2012 the Federal Highway Administration conducted a road safety assessment for Niles Canyon, finding that Caltrans' proposed highway widening was not warranted by the safety data. The FHA identified accident hot-spots within Niles Canyon that should be addressed, and noted four other locations in the canyon with higher priority need of safety improvements than the Alameda Creek Bridge.