

Niles Canyon widening revisited

by Wes Bowers, Fremont Bulletin
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The California Department of Transportation has started the state Route 84 Road Safety Improvement project all over again. Transit officials presented new data and solutions to the public Monday night at Niles Elementary School.

Dozens of Tri-Cities and Sunol residents applauded at the end of the night when George Hunter, a consultant with Value Management Systems, said widening Niles Canyon Road is not necessary in the immediate future.

Caltrans began its Route 84 Safety Improvement Project in 2010, until residents claimed the agency failed to prepare an environmental impact report, and that there were adverse impacts to sensitive species.

The three phases of the project would have widened much of Niles Canyon Road between Fremont and Interstate 680 to provide 12-foot lanes, a 2-foot median and up to 8-foot shoulders. Caltrans proposed cutting 600 trees along Alameda Creek and filling the floodplain with more than four miles of cement retaining walls and riprap a mixed layer of stones or concrete used on an embankment slope to prevent erosion.

A lawsuit filed by the Alameda Creek Alliance and other grassroots organizations was able to halt the project last summer, and a Supreme Court judge ordered the project stop altogether last December.

Since then, Caltrans asked Federal Highway Administration and Value Management Strategies to study the seven-mile stretch of Route 84 to come up with a solution in which everyone could agree.

Hunter told residents Monday night his team came up with 51 countermeasures to improve road safety along Niles Canyon Road.

He said 16 of the measures were only short-term fixes, which included placing reflective materials and signs on several underpasses and guardrails, as well as increased signage and visibility. Twelve medium-term solutions include road realignments, relocating railroad abutments, widening roads, building roundabouts and constructing intersection signals.

"These are just suggestions," Hunter said. "We (VMS) have no authority or power to promote them or implement them. We just want your feedback."

And where Caltrans originally suggested widening the entire length of Niles Canyon Road, Hunter suggested only implementing safety measures at certain points along the route.

Those trouble spots include, in order of severity, Rosewarnes Underpass, the low speed areas between bridges, the Palomares/Farwell Underpass, both intersections at Main Street and the Pleasanton/Sunol exit, and the Alameda Creek Bridge.

Hunter said problems at these locations include roadside design issues, shoulder discontinuities and vegetation obstructing existing safety signs.

The long-term solutions include widening the road to provide 12-foot-wide lanes and 8-foot-wide shoulders; correcting elevations and sight distances at Quarry Road; and extending the eastbound left turn pocket at Quarry Road.

"But there's no need to do these right away," Hunter said. "There's a possibility you may need to do it in the future, but the good news is (the short-term and medium-term solutions) is much less than what was originally proposed."

He added officials from Value Management Systems, the highway administration and Caltrans have to vet the solutions.

Hunter made his suggestions after highway administration representative Craig Allred presented collision data along Niles Canyon Road. Allred said the administration found there were 353 crashes or collisions along the road over the last 10 years. Of those, 14 involved large trucks, he said.

Collisions involving large trucks were the original reason Caltrans wanted to widen Niles Canyon Road, and City of Fremont even considered banning them on that stretch.

Allred said speed accounted for 27 percent of all crashes on the road, while improper turns or loss of vehicle control accounted for 24 percent.

Alcohol was a factor in 14 percent of the crashes along the road, he said.

Additionally, 36 percent of all crashes there involved hitting objects like the guardrail or signs, while 18 percent were rear-end collisions.

Allred said one out of two crashes involved injuries, and 13 of the drivers at fault in all collisions were Fremont residents.

"People familiar with the area tend to drive much more aggressively," he said. "Folks usually involved in these crashes are the ones using the road all the time."

Allred added while the numbers recorded by the highway administration were less than what Caltrans originally found, the number of collisions was still high. He said road safety improvements are still needed along the canyon.

"Modest improvements to the road, and widening the shoulders will be a great benefit to road safety," he said. "Many speed accidents are not just collisions. You have loose gravel, you lose control of the vehicle, and that's because you can't see in front of you."

Allred also said improving undercrossings and intersections is the best solution at this point, adding 15 percent of the accidents along Niles Canyon Road occurred at intersections.

But residents were still not satisfied with the new data.

Jeff Miller, president of the Alameda Creek Alliance, said the federal transit agency was feeding the public nearly the same data that stopped the project in the first place.

Caltrans and the highway administration officials both said at the beginning of the meeting this was a "fresh start" to offer more transparency, but Miller was skeptical.

"When Caltrans presented their crash data, it was revealed they were including crashes that didn't happen in the canyon," he said. "You talk about transparency, but I think if you presented where these crash locations were, people would be a little more trusting of your data."

Miller added Caltrans allegedly presented different crash data numbers at various community meetings. However, Allred assured him and those in attendance this new data was done independently without any prior knowledge of the state agency's findings.

Many in attendance suggested the state simply lower the speed limit along Niles Canyon Road. The speed limit is currently 45 miles per hour, and California Highway Patrol Lt. Jim Libby said motorists will still drive faster than what is posted.

Libby added county engineers survey the road and determine what maximum speed is acceptable. He said engineers don't determine what speed motorists should be driving.

In addition, Libby said the only way motorists will slow down is if Niles Canyon Road is properly enforced. Current road conditions make it nearly impossible for law enforcement agencies to do so.

Shoulders along the canyon do not allow for traffic stops or even for officers to monitor traffic going their direction.

"To enforce traffic on Niles Canyon Road, especially when traffic is going the other way, you need enough space to turn around, and enough space to turn so you don't cause a collision," he said. "We can't do that."

Residents still felt Caltrans and its consultants were trying to push the project through without proper feedback from the community.

"It's difficult for a member of the public to absorb all this," Newark resident Craig Scott said. "It seems like this is Ôwam-bam-thank-you-ma'am' up here. You talk about starting a clean slate, but it doesn't seem like that's what you're doing."

Allred said residents should not be frustrated, as both presentations were preliminary.

Caltrans will be holding more community and stakeholder meetings in the coming months, and the feedback collected Monday night will be posted on the agency's website in about three weeks, officials said.

Visit dot.ca.gov/dist4/nilescanyon for more information and updates on the project.